

COTUIT FIRE DEPARTMENT WINTER STORM HERNANDO AFTER ACTION REPORT FEBRUARY 2026



Operational Period:

- **Start:** Sunday, February 22 – 1800 hrs.
- **End:** Friday, February 27 – 1800 hrs.

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Table of Contents

WINTER STORM HERNANDO OVERVIEW.....	2
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....	2
COMMAND STAFF.....	3
STAFFING.....	4
FIELD OPERATIONS.....	4
FIRE OPERATIONS.....	4
EMS OPERATIONS.....	5
COMMUNICATIONS & DISPATCH OPERATIONS.....	5
CONCLUSION.....	6
OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT AND BEST PRACTICES.....	8
APPENDIX A – DEPARTMENT FEEDBACK SUMMARY.....	11

WINTER STORM HERNANDO OVERVIEW

Winter Storm Hernando impacted southeastern Massachusetts and Cape Cod between February 22 and February 26, 2026. The storm rapidly intensified into a powerful coastal Nor'easter bomb cyclone, producing severe winter weather conditions across Barnstable County and the surrounding region.

The storm generated snowfall totals exceeding 25 inches across portions of Cape Cod, accompanied by wind gust up to 98 mph, contributing to widespread tree damage, downed power lines, and significant impacts to electrical infrastructure throughout the region.

The combination of heavy snow and hurricane-force wind gusts resulted in hazardous travel conditions across Barnstable County. Snowbanks, fallen trees, and downed utility wires obstructed numerous roadways, significantly limiting access for emergency responders, public works crews, and utility restoration teams.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Between 1800 hours on Sunday, February 22 and 1800 hours on Friday, February 27, the Cotuit Fire Department responded to a significant winter storm event that generated sustained operational demand over multiple days.

During this 120-hour operational period, Cotuit Fire responded to a preliminary total of 80 calls for service. These incidents included fires, hazardous conditions, EMS calls, investigations, and a high volume of carbon monoxide and smoke alarm activations. Several incidents involved elevated life safety risks, including confirmed high levels of carbon monoxide in residential structures.

Despite limited staffing, hazardous road conditions, downed trees and wires, and significant access challenges, members of the Cotuit Fire Department maintained continuous operations and provided essential emergency services to the community.

The purpose of this After-Action Report is to document the department's response to Winter Storm Hernando and to identify operational strengths, challenges, and opportunities for improvement. The findings in this report will support future policy review, training initiatives, staffing considerations, and operational planning for large-scale weather events.

The Cotuit Fire Department extends its appreciation to all members who contributed to the storm response. Many personnel balanced extended operational periods, difficult working conditions, and personal responsibilities at home while continuing to support one another and serve the community. The professionalism and teamwork demonstrated throughout the event reflect the strength and commitment of the department.

Staff during the event consisted of the regular on-duty staffing level of three personnel, supplemented by off-duty coverage as available. Off-duty staffing fluctuated throughout the operational period, at times consisting of one additional member and at other times increasing to as many as three additional members depending on availability.

Command oversight for the event was provided by Chief Brown, who remained at the station throughout the storm response and maintained overall command and operational coordination. Deputy Clark was able to supplement command operations by working remotely and providing administrative support and coordination as he was unable to return to the District due to weather-related cancellations.

Due to the regional severity of the storm, the Barnstable County Mutual Aid Coordination Center (MACC) was activated to support interagency coordination.

Following the event, the administration distributed an anonymous survey to members who participated in storm operations to better understand operational challenges encountered during the incident. A summary of this feedback is included in Appendix A.

COMMAND STAFF

Command staff maintained situational awareness throughout the duration of Winter Storm Hernando, monitoring incident activity, weather conditions, staffing levels, and resource availability across multiple operational periods.

Chief Brown served as the Incident Commander, providing on-site command and operational oversight throughout the event.

Deputy Clark provided administrative support and ensured that the public was informed of storm status and received regular informational updates through the use of the department's social media outlets.

Firefighter Williamson provided administrative support, assisting with coordination, documentation, and continuity of administrative functions during the prolonged response. This support helped ensure that operational decision-making remained the primary focus of command staff.

Command staff maintained ongoing coordination with Cotuit Water Department, Town agencies and partner organizations, including public works, utilities, and regional public safety partners, to support roadway access, hazard mitigation, and overall response effectiveness.

Chief Brown coordinated with the Water Department and local emergency management resources to address the Cotuit Water Department's pumps all going offline during the height of the storm.

Calls for service were prioritized based on life safety and hazard severity, with priority given to fire incidents, confirmed carbon monoxide emergencies, medical calls, and hazardous conditions posing immediate risk to the public. This prioritization was critical to managing concurrent incidents during periods of high call volume and limited staffing.

Following the storm response, command staff conducted a post-event reconciliation of reports and documentation. The volume and duration of the incident required additional administrative effort to ensure that incident reports, call data, and operational records were accurate and complete.

Command staff also coordinated post storm cost recovery efforts for the Fire District. These efforts include a damage assessment for the Fire District and coordinated meetings with the Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency and Federal Emergency Management Agency.

STAFFING

Staff during the event consisted of the department's standard on-duty complement of three personnel supplemented by off-duty staffing when available.

Prior to the storm, on Friday, February 20, the department notified all members of the impending weather event and requested additional staffing beginning Sunday, February 22 at 1800 hrs.

Additional staffing requests were issued on the mornings of February 23, 24, 25, 26, and 27th to encourage available personnel to respond and assist with operational coverage.

Complete staffing records for the operational period are included in Appendix B.

FIELD OPERATIONS

During the operational period, the Cotuit Fire Department conducted sustained field operations related to Winter Storm Hernando. Personnel managed multiple incident types simultaneously, including fire responses, EMS calls, hazardous conditions, and investigations under adverse weather and roadway conditions.

Operations were conducted continuously across multiple operational periods while crews navigated restricted roadway access, snow accumulation, downed trees, and electrical hazards.

During the storm the Fire Department also assisted with essential employee transportation to local shelters to assist with disaster operations.

FIRE OPERATIONS

Fire operations during the winter storm included a preliminary total of three fire responses, consisting of one chimney fire, one working structure fire, and a resident attempting to light

indoor fireplace with an accelerant. These incidents required full operational attention despite limited access, snow-covered roadways, and reduced maneuverability for responding apparatus.

In addition to fire suppression activities, field units responded to 20 hazardous condition incidents, primarily involving downed trees, downed or arcing electrical wires, and storm-related obstructions. These incidents posed ongoing life safety and property risks and often required coordination with utility companies and other municipal agencies to mitigate hazards and restore safe conditions.

Crews also managed 32 carbon monoxide and smoke alarm activations, including three incidents where elevated carbon monoxide levels were confirmed within residential structures. These responses required rapid assessment and mitigation to address immediate life safety concerns, often while operating in difficult weather and travel conditions.

Fire operations were conducted continuously throughout the event, with companies balancing emergent incidents against a high overall volume of calls. Snowbanks, narrow roadways, and obstructed access points contributed to response delays and required adaptive decision-making by officers and crews in the field.

EMS OPERATIONS

Emergency Medical Services operations accounted for a preliminary total of 25 calls for service during the storm. EMS responses included both emergency medical calls and transportation assistance for residents to local shelters, as storm conditions affected housing, utilities, and access to care.

EMS crews operated under challenging conditions including poor road access, limited visibility, and extended operational periods. Units were required to remain flexible in their deployment to support both medical emergencies and storm-related assistance requests while maintaining readiness for higher-acuity incidents.

The concurrent demands of EMS, fire suppression, and hazard mitigation required careful prioritization and coordination of available resources. Despite limited staffing and prolonged operational demands, EMS personnel continued to provide timely and effective care to residents throughout the storm.

COMMUNICATIONS & DISPATCH OPERATIONS

The Communications Center experienced a sustained and significant increase in activity during Winter Storm Hernando. Over the course of the event, the COMM Communications Center answered more than 405 calls for service. These figures are preliminary and do not include multiple trouble alarm notifications originating from the same address, which further contributed to dispatcher workload and call volume.

Due to the extended duration and intensity of the storm, additional dispatchers were brought in to augment staffing and support call handling, radio traffic, and coordination with field units. This staffing augmentation was critical to maintaining operations during periods of peak demand.

Communications operations were challenged by several system disruptions during the event. The fiber optic internet connection to fire station was disrupted for a significant duration during the storm.

The internet outage rendered the computer-Aided Dispatch (CAD) system inoperable for periods of time, requiring dispatchers to rely on alternative methods to process and track incidents. The outage also led to the fire station telephone system being inoperable. This further complicated call intake and coordination efforts, increasing reliance on radio communications and manual documentation.

The fire station was able to use a Star Link connection to help with the internet associated issues. However, the Star Link connection could not remedy the phone line system failure.

In addition, radio communications experienced intermittent difficulties in certain areas, likely due to storm-related impacts on infrastructure and environmental conditions. These issues require dispatchers and field units to adapt communication practices to maintain situational awareness and ensure continuity of operations.

Despite these challenges, communications personnel maintained operational effectiveness through adaptability, staffing augmentation, and coordination with command staff and field units. The performance of the Communications Center was a critical component in supporting emergency operations throughout the duration of the storm.

CONCLUSION

Winter Storm Hernando created a sustained operational challenge for the Cotuit Fire Department, requiring continuous emergency response operations under hazardous weather conditions, limited roadway access, and constrained staffing levels. During the operational period, department members responded to a wide range of incidents including fire responses, hazardous conditions, emergency medical calls, and numerous carbon monoxide alarms associated with storm-related power outages.

Despite these challenges, members of the Cotuit Fire Department maintained a high level of operational readiness and continued to provide essential emergency services to the community throughout the duration of the event. The professionalism, adaptability, and teamwork demonstrated by department personnel ensured that life safety remained the highest priority during a demanding and extended response.

The observations and recommended actions identified in this report will be used to guide future planning, training, and operational improvements to strengthen the department's preparedness for future large-scale weather events.

Chief Brown and Deputy Chief Clark commend the members of the Cotuit Fire Department for their dedication, resilience, and unwavering commitment to protecting the residents of the Cotuit Fire District during Winter Storm Hernando. Their efforts reflect the professionalism and pride that define the department and its service to the community.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT AND BEST PRACTICES

- **Issue Statement 1:** A need exists for the ability to call in additional staffing during large events.
 - **Background Discussion:** The Department at the time of the storm had twelve full-time members with one assigned to light duty. At any given time three of which were on duty. This left a total of eight people to rely on for off duty coverage. This incident was also hampered by it occurring at the end of school vacation week when several of the members were away with their families, and unable to return due to weather related cancellations. The inability to call in additional help led to some extended working hours during a very busy period with little down time to rest.
 - **Recommended Actions:**
 - Explore the need and feasibility for increased on-duty staffing.
 - Explore staffing augmentation strategies for extended-duration events, including earlier callback considerations when significant storms are forecasted and contingency staffing models for multi-day operations.
- **Issue Statement 2:** A need exists to ensure members working extended length of time during large events or disasters receive rest, rehab, and food to ensure continued safe operations.
 - **Background Discussion:** Due to sustained call volume, limited staffing availability, and the duration of the incident, several members remained on duty for many consecutive hours without adequate sleep or the ability to formally cycle through rest and rehabilitation periods. The lack of structured rest, rehab, and nutritional support increased physical and cognitive fatigue among personnel, which can negatively impact decision-making, situational awareness, and overall operational safety. related injuries or errors.
 - **Recommended Actions:**
 - Develop a maximum continuous duty guideline and mandatory rest periods during extended incidents.
 - Explore pre-event mutual aid staffing agreements for non-emergent coverage during extended-duration incidents.
 - Identify options for both hot meals and rapid food delivery when road conditions allow.

- Develop systems to assist with tracking work/rest cycles and proactively rotate crews before fatigue becomes a safety issue.
- **Issue Statement 3:** There is no Department procedure for handling emergencies that may arise at members' home while they are on duty for extended periods.
 - **Background Discussion:** Several of the members worked in excess of 48 hours during the height of the storm while their families were left at home dealing with the impacts of the disaster. When their families and homes are being impacted their ability to focus on operational tasks is impacted on duty.
 - **Recommended Actions:**
 - Develop a procedure to assist members with handling at home/family emergencies during large scale incidents and disasters.
- **Issue Statement 4:** The regional mutual aid radio system and CMED communications went offline.
 - **Background Discussion:** Regional mutual aid and CMED communications are handled through the Barnstable County Sheriff's Office. During the storm both forms of communication went offline. Ambulances had difficulty communicating with the hospitals, and online medical control physicians. If mutual aid was required, it would have been delayed.
 - **Recommended Actions:**
 - Continue to work with Town of Barnstable Regional Emergency Communications Center project to ensure redundancies in the system.
 - Develop departmental contingency procedures for loss of CMED and regional mutual aid channels, including alternate radio channels and communication workflows.
 - Incorporate communications failure scenarios into annual drills or tabletop exercises.
- **Issue Statement 5:** Generator failures combined with hard-to-clear access roads significantly impacted the ability to pump water from municipal wells.
 - **Background Discussion:** Failures with generator systems and restricted access to critical water infrastructure led to all pumping stations being interrupted, increasing concern for sustained water availability and fire protection capacity. These challenges occurred concurrently with elevated emergency response activity, compounding operational stress on both public safety and utility personnel.

- o **Recommended Actions:**
 - Strengthen coordination between fire, water, and emergency management to ensure shared situational awareness during incidents impacting water supply.
 - Develop operational guidelines for fire suppression and emergency response under limited water conditions.
 - Identify alternative water sources, mutual aid options, and conservation measures to preserve system integrity during disruptions.
 - Integrate water system failure scenarios into tabletop and functional exercises.
- **Issue Statement 6:** There is a need to ensure phone and internet operability during extended power outages.
 - o **Background Discussion:** During the winter storm, the Fire Department experienced a complete loss of internet connectivity, which had a cascading impact on core operational systems. The outage disrupted Computer-Aided Dispatch (CAD) functionality, telephone communications, and the ability to electronically track, document, and reconcile incident activity throughout the event.
 - o **Recommended Actions:**
 - Establish a secondary internet connection that does not rely on the primary wired service (e.g., cellular-based or satellite-based connectivity) to provide automatic failovers during outages.
 - Ensure the backup system can support CAD access, VoIP/telephone services, and basic data transmission during emergency operations.
 - Evaluate the feasibility of deployable internet solutions (e.g., portable cellular hotspots or satellite units) that can be rapidly activated during prolonged incidents.

APPENDIX A – DEPARTMENT FEEDBACK SUMMARY

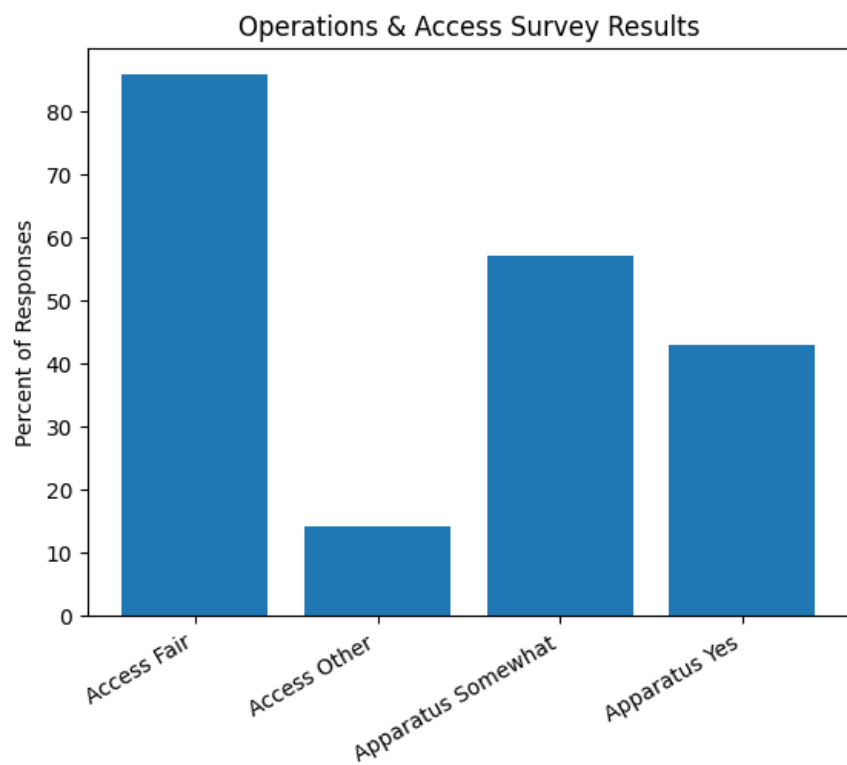
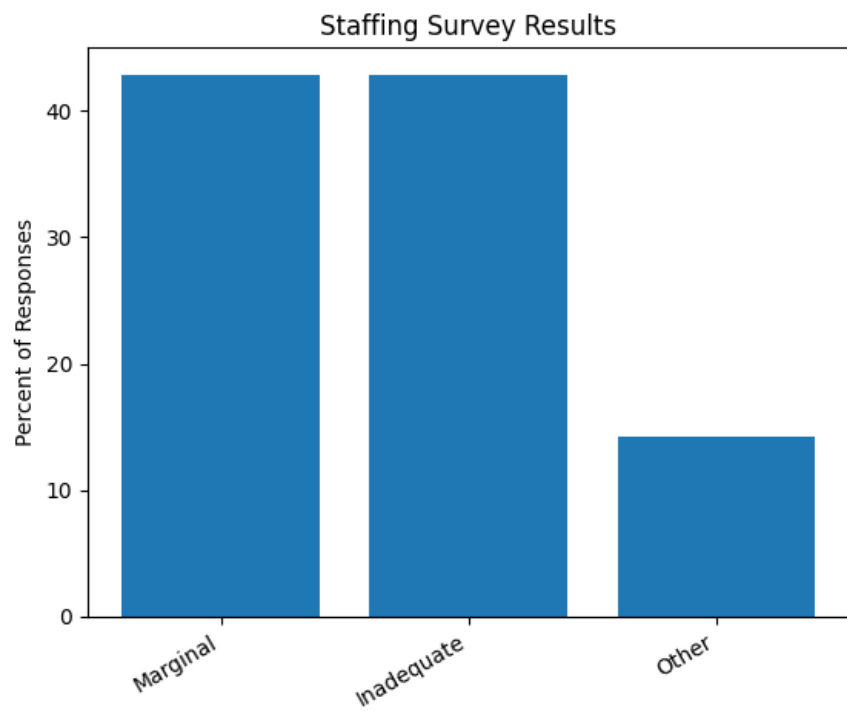
Following the winter storm event, the administration requested anonymous feedback from members of the department who participated in operations during the incident. The purpose of this survey was to capture frontline operational observations and identify areas for improvement to support future storm response planning and operational readiness.

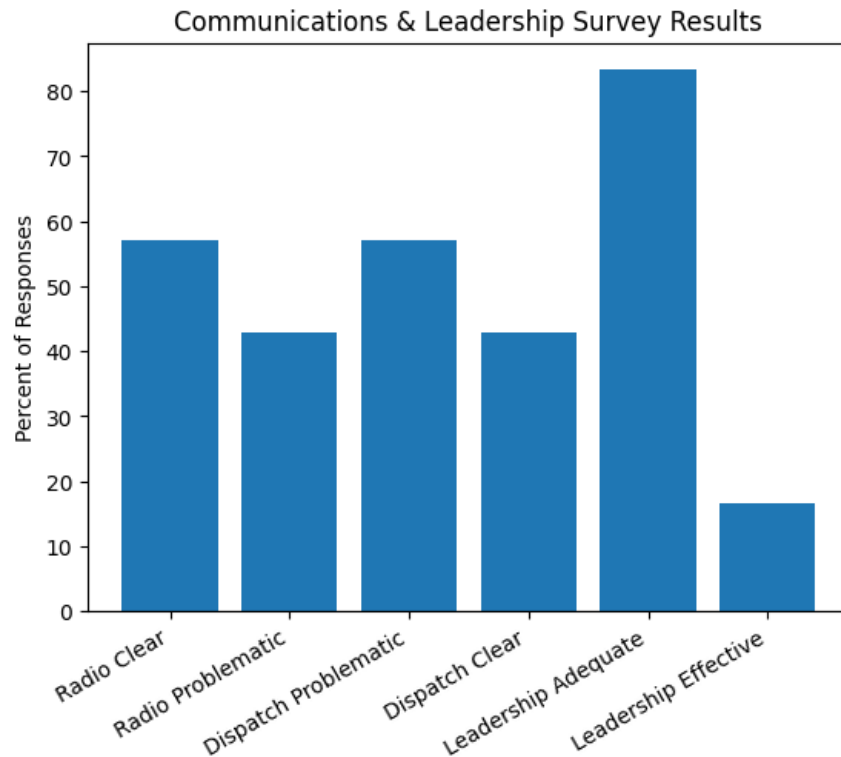
Survey Methodology

- An anonymous electronic survey was distributed to department members following the storm event.
- Participation was voluntary and responses were collected to identify operational strengths and areas for improvement.
- The survey focused on staffing, access to incidents, apparatus utilization, communications, and leadership/command presence.

Survey Results Summary

Survey Topic	Key Results
Staffing Levels	42.9% Marginal and 42.9% Inadequate. All respondents indicated staffing challenges impacted operational capacity and response times.
Access to Calls	85.7% rated access as fair due to narrow roads, snowbanks, and downed trees or wires impacting access.
Apparatus Utilization	57.1% rated apparatus utilization as Somewhat adequate and 42.9% Yes; several comments noted apparatus becoming stuck during operations.
Radio Communications	57.1% Clear and reliable; 42.9% Occasionally problematic.
Dispatch Communications	57.1% Occasionally problematic; 42.9% Clear and reliable.
Leadership & Command	83.3% Adequate; 16.7% Effective. Comments noted leadership presence and leading by example during the incident.





Key Operational Takeaways

- Staffing limitations significantly impacted the department's ability to manage simultaneous incidents during the storm.
- Access constraints caused by snowbanks, narrow roads, and downed trees or wires were the most frequently identified operational challenge.
- Apparatus mobility was occasionally limited due to roadway conditions, with several reports of vehicles becoming stuck.
- Radio and dispatch communications were generally functional but experienced intermittent challenges during peak operational periods.
- Leadership presence during the incident was viewed positively by members, with comments highlighting leadership visibility and support during operations.