

Senate Transportation Committee

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Senate Veterans Affairs & Emergency Preparedness Committee

Pennsylvania State Police response to Winter Storm Jonas

02/16/16



Good morning Chairmen, and members of the Senate Transportation, and Senate Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committees. I am Major Edward C. Hoke, Director of the Bureau of Patrol, Pennsylvania State Police (PSP). Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today regarding our department's response to Winter Storm Jonas.

The PSP takes great pride in serving the citizens and visitors of this Commonwealth. Every day, across the state, the men and women of the PSP respond to emergency incidents of varying size and complexity. Whether the incident involves a single vehicle crash where no one has been injured, a mass casualty criminal incident, or a natural disaster affecting the entire state, the goals of the responding troopers are always the same: protection of life, incident stabilization, preservation of property, and the restoration of order.

PSP Troopers are highly trained to achieve these goals and to manage emergency incidents effectively and efficiently. Department policies and procedures provide the necessary guidance and direction, and perhaps even more importantly, the authority for our personnel to work together with our local, state, and federal law enforcement and emergency management partners to ensure a positive outcome. The PSP fully recognizes the value of working together with all of these agencies in order to achieve a common goal. Utilizing the National Incident Management System and operating under a unified command structure, troopers work with our partners to

develop strategic goals, establish tactical objectives, and coordinate resources and personnel to fulfill the mission.

During the week leading up to Winter Storm Jonas, weather forecasts were closely watched and standard plans for a significant weather event went into place. Effective January 22, 2016, our Troop operational units were placed on "Alert Condition W" requiring stations and Troop Headquarters to report situational awareness information to the Department Watch Center (DWC). The DWC had been developed as a result of internal review of past significant incidents and weather events to provide 24/7 situational awareness throughout the entire PSP command structure. As a result, our troopers, supervisors, commanders, and the executive officers are able to work with a common understanding of issues happening "on the ground."

Throughout the weekend of January 22-23, 2016, much of Pennsylvania was being ravaged by Winter Storm Jonas. Significant snowfall enveloped much of state, with certain regions of the Commonwealth being hit particularly hard. This was especially true in Allegheny Township, Somerset County, in the area traversed by the Pennsylvania Turnpike. As the snow fell, multiple commercial vehicles travelling west began struggling to ascend the grade of the Allegheny Mountain approaching the Allegheny Tunnel. Their eventual inability to move due to the deteriorating roadway conditions resulted in a rapid queue development which immediately became an emergency due to the conditions. Snow continued to fall at the rate of several inches per hour, and the steady addition of vehicles to the backlog exasperated the situation.

We estimate that approximately 400 commercial vehicles, 60 tour buses, and 100 passenger vehicles ultimately became embroiled in the backlog. Consequently, road maintenance crews were unable to plow or treat the roadway. With traffic flow crippled, the crisis became apparent.

This incident engaged the full resources and attention of Troop T and the command structure of the department. While it has become commonly accepted in events such as these, it is still worth mentioning that the men and women of Troop T performed their duties with outstanding bravery and diligence. Along with our partners in the Pennsylvania National Guard and local emergency services, troopers conducted car to car welfare checks, delivering food, water, and gasoline. Members endured hours in the frigid cold while wading through thigh deep snow to ensure the safety and security of the stranded motorists. Members of the PSP and other stakeholders worked tirelessly to stabilize the situation and followed through with many tasks until the incident was resolved and the Turnpike was eventually reopened. Simply stated, I could not be more proud of the effort put forth by our troopers who provided exemplary service under extremely demanding circumstances.

Naturally, identifying and communicating key information, gathering intelligence and obtaining identifiable resources needed to bring incidents such as these to a timelier conclusion will be the focus of our continued assessment and refinement of protocols. The safety, security and convenience of motorists travelling our highways will always be our highest priority regardless of the conditions. We are thankful that despite

the difficulties, the preservation of life and the stabilization of this complex event, once it began, were successful.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide you a general overview of the activities of the Pennsylvania State Police, particularly in regard to Winter Storm Jonas. At this time, I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.