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LAKE-EFFECT STORM

Stranded motorists on Thruway not happy about being abandoned

BY BARBARA O'BRIEN AND TOM PRECIOUS / NEWS STAFF REPORTERS



Derek Gee/Buffalo News

Crews continue working to free motorists stranded on the New York state Thruway near Ridge Road on Wednesday. Many drivers were forced to spend two nights in their vehicles.

David Carr has driven the Thruway through Hamburg dozens of times from his home in Washington, D.C., to get to Toronto.

Samuel Martin of Oregon was on his way to Massachusetts.

Steven Ratcliff of Cheektowaga was headed to work in Hamburg.

They and dozens of others became stranded on the Thruway beginning Tuesday and spent two harrowing nights in their vehicles because of the lake effect storm that blasted the Snow Belt.

After being marooned, they were angry, saying they felt abandoned. Their family and friends were furious.

After a similar incident on the Thruway here four years ago, state officials had promised that motorists never again would be stranded on the Thruway during a snowstorm.

But it did happen again. And on top of that, when Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo arrived Wednesday, he blamed the “mistake” on the drivers.

“Part of it is citizen responsibility,” he said after arriving here Wednesday for an inspection of storm damage and before a trip to see some of the people stranded on the Thruway in Hamburg.

“People violated the closure of the Thruway,” Cuomo told reporters, saying the drivers could be ticketed for violating orders that the road was closed.

The stranded drivers interviewed Wednesday while still in their vehicles said there was no warning the interstate was closed, and no police cruisers or gates lowered to keep them from getting on at entrances.

And despite what the governor and other state officials said that personnel were checking on their welfare while stranded, the drivers and their passengers insisted no one checked on them for more than 30 hours.

“I know it’s a big storm ... It’s Buffalo, you get big storms,” said Carr, of Washington. “It’s embarrassing. If you’re an American, if you believe all that stuff about we’re No 1.”

Volunteers on snowmobiles brought Gatorade to some, water to others, tossing the nourishment over the median. But many drivers of the 100 or more vehicles marooned on the interstate had no water or food for 35 hours. Some ran out of gas. And all of those interviewed by The Buffalo News said no police officer or other Thruway official approached them until Wednesday morning, if at all.

Worried relatives, hundreds or even thousands of miles away, kept in touch with the marooned by cell phone, and tried to light a fire under public officials.

“I thought ‘My God, he’s going to freeze to death, because he’s not going to get rescued in time,’” said Carr’s sister, Adreinne, of Golden, Colo. “I’ve emailed the White House, I spoke with Andrew Cuomo’s office.”

More scrutiny

While the Thruway was not the only local road where vehicles were abandoned and drivers stranded, the Thruway Authority system is certain to face more scrutiny over how it handled this latest crisis.

Thruway officials and the new Cuomo administration’s state operations staff in January 2011 promised to make sure no repeat occurred from the December 2010 snowstorm.

Cuomo said this storm was far worse than the December 2010 storm that stranded hundreds of vehicles on the Thruway in West Seneca but that it was handled better this time around. He also said the Thruway Authority, an agency his administration controls, shut down the highway at “an appropriate time,” but motorists ignored the notice.

“Even though it was closed, people still went on the Thruway,” he said.

But no one told the seven stranded drivers and relatives The News talked to that the Thruway was closed.

Martin, the Colorado trucker hauling two recreational vehicles on a flatbed truck from Indiana to the Boston area, noted that he had to get a paper ticket – at a toll booth with its green open light still on – when he entered the Thruway and there were no warnings at any point until he became stranded.

And while Thruway officials said that warning signs about the dangerous snowstorm were activated on highways in Ohio and Pennsylvania to alert New York-bound drivers, Martin said he saw no warning signs as he drove through those two states.

“If there was a warning of snow, I’d not have come this way,” he said, referring to an alternative route on I-80 south of Cleveland.

No rescue offers

Cuomo said “virtually all” of the stranded drivers were approached to make sure occupants were OK, but some motorists and their families said they received no rescue offers through the two nights.

“I think they should have been monitored through the night, throughout the whole entire time,” said Martin’s wife, Wendy, at home with their four children in Oregon. “He just feels abandoned out there.”

Carr, the Washington resident who owns a business installing squash courts around the world, was

taken from his pickup near the Blasdell exit to the Lackawanna toll booth building late Wednesday morning.

But he said it was not a relief to be out of his vehicle. Confusion reigned in the small area, with some authorities talking about a bus to take drivers to a warming shelter, another asking who wanted to go to a hotel. All he wanted was a little gas to get his truck down the road to get out of Buffalo, he said.

“You just see the left hand doesn’t know what the right hand is doing,” he said.

New friends

Ratcliff of Cheektowaga and Shawn Daley of Amherst were headed to work in separate vehicles early Tuesday morning, and didn’t know how dire the road had become.

Daley, 39, works at Mentholatum in Orchard Park, while Ratcliff, 40, was going to the Ford Stamping Plant in Woodlawn.

They both were stuck on the westbound Thruway just east of the Lackawanna toll barrier, about 4:30 a.m. Tuesday.

Daley’s car was running out of gas, and then his battery gave out. He walked to a few cars, asking if they had room for another passenger. Ratcliff opened his door. After more than 28 hours together, they became fast friends.

“Letting me in his car, pretty much saved my life,” Daley said, adding that several other motorists declined to let him.

A few hundred feet from them, Lisa and Paul Winter of Eden spent two nights in their Chevy Avalanche near the toll barrier. About 7 a.m. Wednesday, Paul Winter saw a car coming on the eastbound side of the road. He climbed over the median and flagged it down, and the driver took the couple to the toll barrier building.

“There are vending machines, and running water,” Lisa Winter said. “We are blessed, we leave it at that.”

They spent 30 hours in the pickup truck and did have enough gas to keep it running. A snowmobiler tossed a couple bottles of water to them Tuesday night, but no one came to the truck to

check on them.

Michael Pinkoske of Lakeview is one of the lucky ones. He was able to drive his pickup truck down the Thruway after being hauled out about 9:30 a.m. Wednesday. He had been on the westbound Thruway, just past the split with Route 219, for 30 hours, bogged down when he was coming home from work at the Tops Market warehouse in Lancaster Tuesday morning.

“All of a sudden, it was just like a parking lot,” said his wife, Joanne, waiting for him at home.

A few motorists came to sit in his car. One was a man with a heart condition, who used Pinkoske’s phone to call his son, who was able to drive his truck, with a snowmobile, to the nearest exit. He then was able to get his father in the middle of the night.

“Somebody can reach his father like that with a snowmobile, but no one in the county could get people out to help these people,” Joanne Pinkoske said.

State’s response

A senior administration official who asked not to be identified said the state learned from the 2010 experience and implemented several new procedures, including a “decentralized” command structure that allows local authorities rather than Albany to decide when to close the Thruway.

Staff was notified, activated and ready to be deployed with equipment during this week’s storm, the official said, and many – but not all – systems worked well. He said the state was also pleased that gates installed at some entrances kept traffic from entering the Thruway, though gates are not feasible at high-speed entrances such as from the Kensington Expressway and Niagara Thruway, so some motorists ventured onto the mainline anyway. A new review will occur in a few days.

“You learn from what these things are,” he said, adding that the new procedures prevented a recurrence of “wall to wall bumpers” of the 2010 emergency.

News Staff Reporter Robert J. McCarthy contributed to this story.