

# THE BUFFALO NEWS

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## LAKE-EFFECT STORM

# Two drivers found dead in snow-covered cars

Both men called repeatedly for aid

BY MATT SPINA AND TIFFANY LANKES / NEWS STAFF REPORTERS

Two men were found dead in recent days inside their snowbound vehicles, and officials hope they do not find more bodies inside the numerous autos stranded on local roads.

Police agencies are investigating the deaths of Donald J. Abate in Alden and David M. Deneke in Cheektowaga. Both victims had spent hours calling for help, but aid never arrived.

Abate, 46, was on his way home to Blasdell from his job as an officer at the federal detention facility in Batavia when his customary route became impassable just after midnight Tuesday. Abate called his family to say he was pulling off Broadway in Alden to seek safe haven.

He rolled toward a Tops Supermarket, but ended up in a ditch, according to family members who talked to him during his ordeal. They learned he had called 911 and expected a response at any moment. As he waited, the snow piled up, and he was unable to get out of his vehicle.

Family members lost contact with Abate on Tuesday afternoon. His father, James Abate of Hamburg, then called 911 on his son's behalf. But James Abate said his call landed with a Hamburg dispatcher who said he could do nothing for him.

James Abate said he also called the AAA to try to get a tow truck to his son, but was later told that law enforcement officers – possibly the state police – turned the truck away. Meanwhile, emergency vehicles may have passed Donald Abate's stuck Kia but did not help, a law enforcement source said.

Abate's widow, Jackie, said she, too, was told the tow truck had been turned away because of the

driving ban. She last talked with her husband at 11 a.m. Tuesday, 10 hours after his vehicle slid into the ditch. While still trying to reach him around 3 p.m., she learned the mailbox on his cellphone was full.

Hours later, the state police called her for the make and model of her husband's car, and his cellphone number. At 4 a.m. Wednesday, her phone rang.

Could she come to her front door?

There stood a state trooper, who told her that her husband did not make it. They had found him inside his snow-covered auto, with the car turned off. They weren't sure of his cause of death, she said. He had been in good health.

"I'm just trying to get through day to day," she told The Buffalo News. "I lost the love of my life. And my in-laws, I feel so bad for them."

Donald Abate was the only son of James and Maryann Abate. To be closer to them, he chose to live in the Hamburg area, despite a 110-mile round-trip commute.

"We're just disappointed that no one could come and help him," James Abate said. "He was all alone. Maybe he died of fright."

Steve Pacer, a spokesman for AAA in Western New York, had little to say about the death as AAA investigates its response to Abate's calls.

"As a result of unprecedented and dangerous weather conditions and despite our best efforts, neither AAA – nor police and emergency personnel – were able to reach Mr. Abate," Pacer said in a written statement. "Our thoughts and prayers go out to his wife and family during this difficult time."

Pacer didn't return telephone messages to ask why AAA, when given Abate's location, could not reach him.

The state police issued a similar statement.

"Our heart goes out to his family," the agency said. "As is with any ongoing death investigation, all of the circumstances will be reviewed."

Deneke, 51, of Depew, spent days in his white Chevrolet Cavalier. He, too, had tried to call for help more than once. Police, spurred to search for him by a concerned family member, found his body about 6:30 a.m. Friday in his auto, buried under snow on Innsbruck Drive near Union Road.

Deneke was on his way to work at a Christmas World facility Tuesday morning when his car became immobile just yards from his destination, a relative said. He may have been sideswiped by a plow.

As the snowstorm persisted, Deneke stayed with the car, calling for a tow truck and for police. He talked to his mother, too, but she lost contact with him after his cellphone battery died Tuesday afternoon.

Police acknowledged that Deneke called AAA and then the police dispatch center Tuesday morning. He was told it would take at least eight hours for a tow truck to reach him, but he was added to a list.

Late in the day his mother, Judith L. Bauer, called police to say she could not locate her son and asked if he had been found.

Then on Friday morning, town police were contacted by a AAA driver out looking for Deneke and

other motorists who had called in prior days.

Had police heard from Deneke? They had not.

Then they called Deneke's mother. She had not heard from him either.

A front-loader started clearing out the snow on Innsbruck Drive, and Deneke's body was found. An autopsy is scheduled for Saturday.

"The Cheektowaga Police offer sincere condolences to the family and friends of David," the department said.

"He was a fabulous employee," said David Gordon, whose Christmas World business was dealt a blow this week when a warehouse roof caved in under the weight of lake-effect snow.

"He worked in our Christmascentral.com Internet shipping warehouse, I believe for about two years," Gordon said of Deneke. "This guy was a troubleshooter. He would find orders that nobody else could. Just a very, very beloved employee."

At a late-day news conference Thursday, Erie County Executive Mark C. Poloncarz expressed hope that no more storm victims are found inside snow-bound vehicles.

The State Police announced that a Boston resident was found dead outside his home. Jon Barsam, 57, had not been heard from for a couple of days. After a neighbor alerted police, his body was found under several feet of snow at the base of his front porch steps on South Abbott Road. Police do not believe he died shoveling snow. An autopsy is expected.