

Bomb cyclone, flooding hit midwest

On weather radar, the storm resembled a massive circular hurricane looming over most of the country. The “bomb cyclone” superstorm dumped rain and snow on the Midwest in March, causing record floods. In the center of the storm, nestled between two rivers, lies Fremont, NE.

“We tried every way possible, but there was no way out,” Fremont Branch 89 President **Rocky Ognissanti** said. Postal employees were trapped in the city Friday, March 15, by rising flood waters. Fremont fronts the Platte River to the south, with the Elkhorn River a few miles northeast of the city. Flood water spilling over from both rivers blocked



Above and below: Jenny Cox's flooded house

all routes in and out, so Ognissanti and other employees who live outside the city were unable to reach their homes.

That morning, the water had prevented letter carriers from getting to work from their homes outside Fremont, a city of 26,000 people. Those who lived in other locations and were able to get to work had issues with rising water on their routes. There wasn't much mail to deliver anyway, since most mail trucks couldn't get through. Ognissanti and several other carriers stuck with it and delivered their entire routes.

By day's end, though, it was clear that rising water was blocking most routes out of the city. Traveling in a caravan, Ognissanti, who lives in nearby Omaha, and some fellow postal employees drove their cars together to try to find a way out. “We tried different ways, but we were stopped by the flooding,” he said. “There was water everywhere.”

Ognissanti and several colleagues were stuck in Fremont. They headed back to the post office and prepared to spend the night there if necessary. They set up bedding in the post office and shopped for food, supplies and medicine. Meanwhile, they searched for a place to sleep instead of the post office, and ended up staying the night at a steward's mother's house in town.

The next morning, the stranded postal employees gathered more supplies in case they were stuck longer until they learned that USPS had arranged for their safe passage home. “We got word that we had to evac from the post office later that day,” Ognissanti said. The Postal Service had arranged to fly them out on a small plane to Omaha, about 25 miles away. It took two trips to fly all seven employees out on the four-passenger airplane.

It wasn't until Monday afternoon

that a mail truck was able to reach Fremont again. Several carriers came to the post office that afternoon to help sort the mail, Ognissanti said.

“These carriers showed lots of pride and a sense of responsibility and commitment by taking the extra step in helping the community, getting the mail ready to be delivered,” he said.

Letter carriers walked their routes around flood water as best they could and got back to normal. Some parts of Fremont, though, will never be the same, as flooding destroyed many homes.

Ognissanti praised NALC and the Disaster Relief Foundation for reaching out to help immediately. “In a moment of need, you really see the good in people,” he said. “I am so proud, my members also, we are so proud to belong to such a great union that takes care of its members.

“Everyone was just reaching out and putting their arms around us,” he added. “It means a lot to us.”

On the day of the flood, Ognissanti made phone calls to account for other carriers in nearby towns. All were safe, but three carriers in Branch 89 suffered severe flood damage to their homes, including Fremont resident **Jenny Cox**.

Neighbors told Cox not to worry about the rising water because the floods had never reached their homes before, but she was still concerned.

“I saw the water, and I was really worried,” she said. “This is not good.”

She couldn't get to work on Thursday, March 14, because of flooding. On Friday, the water had reached her driveway. That night, she awoke to find water inside her house.

“The water in my living room was two or three feet high,” she said, “and outside, it was five to six feet high.”





The flooding in Fremont, as captured by Rocky Ognissanti as he and other carriers were being flown out.

After calling for help, Cox gathered a few possessions and vital papers in a backpack and waited on the second floor until firefighters in a rescue boat took her to higher ground.

Her car and her boyfriend’s motorcycle were totaled and there was severe damage to her home. Her uniform, which she had stored in her car, also was destroyed.

“It will take months before we can go back to live at the house,” she said. “Maybe by June.”

Cox returned to work the following Monday without a uniform. In a few days, though, she received some uniform items donated through the Disaster Relief Foundation. Cox is living with family in Fremont while her home is cleaned up and restored.

Despite what she went through, Cox said, “I feel so blessed by the people helping us.”

The Postal Service has tracked postal employees whose homes or cars were affected in some way by flood water or whose routes to work were blocked by water or damaged roads or bridges, Region 5 National Business Agent Mike Birkett said. To date, we know of 19 city carriers affected as well as several dozen other postal employees and managers also affected. Because it can take weeks or months for flood water to pass through waterways and across the landscape, more postal employees could face threats to their homes.

As soon as the storm struck, NALC began the process of identifying members throughout the Midwest affected by the flooding to ensure that they were safe and to provide assistance, if needed, through the NALC Disaster Relief Foundation. The foundation has arranged for delivery of uniforms and supplies to

stricken members and is helping them apply for assistance grants.

The NALC Disaster Relief Foundation was created last year to make it easier for help to reach members in need. Many branches asked NALC to establish a mechanism for donations, supplies and other assistance so that carriers affected by disasters could receive help faster and more easily.

NALC President Fredric Rolando announced the creation of the foundation at the national convention in Detroit in July of 2018. “The NALC Disaster Relief Foundation reflects the will of the members, who have asked for a way to help their fellow carriers quickly and efficiently,” Rolando said.


Using donations from letter carriers, the Foundation provides assistance in the form of grants and emergency supplies, and is building a trained volunteer network to respond to disasters. Donations go directly to individual letter carrier members or to branches and state associations needing assistance—no administrative costs are deducted.

Donations may be sent to NALC Disaster Relief Foundation, 100 Indiana Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20001-2144. Donations are not yet tax-deductible; the foundation’s application for tax-exempt status is pending.

The application for a relief grant is available on the foundation’s website, nalc.org/disaster. Grants are provided for property damage sustained to a primary residence, automobile or personal property from causes such as, but not limited to, hurricanes, floods, tornadoes, wildfires, earthquakes or severe storms, and are provided only to NALC members. Members do not have to wait for emergency relief or insurance claims to be settled to apply. Applications must be received no



The Fremont carriers prepared to shelter in the post office.



**NALC
Disaster
Relief
Foundation**

Make a donation by sending a check or money order to NALC Disaster Relief Foundation, 100 Indiana Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20001-2144.

later than 120 days from the date when the natural disaster occurred, unless the applicant can provide sufficient reasons for a delay.

“This storm will have long-lasting effects. Some rivers haven’t even reached full flood stage yet, and levees are breaking everywhere,” Rolando said. “Letter carriers and branches that want to help their fellow carriers affected by this huge flood can give through the Disaster Relief Foundation.”

As this article went to press in April, another “bomb cyclone” storm was developing over the Midwest. *The Postal Record* will report on any news about this storm in a future issue. **PR**