



# Law Enforcement's Response to Natural Disasters

**H**urricane Sandy devastated communities throughout New Jersey, with much of the most devastating destruction occurring in coastal communities. In Ocean County alone, 40,000 buildings were damaged by the storm's winds and floodwaters, and the county suffered nearly half the damage recorded throughout New Jersey, according to the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

The local law enforcement response from agencies throughout the state to this natural disaster and its aftereffects was nothing short of heroic. While it is not possible to recount all of their stories, a few examples of their efforts, and the collective efforts of local law enforcement leaders through the agency of their State Police Chiefs Association, will give just a small but representative example of the work done to safeguard the public by local law enforcement during this unprecedented event in New Jersey.

## Little Egg Harbor Township

*Richard Buzby, Chief, Little Egg Harbor, New Jersey, Police Department*

**L**ittle Egg Harbor (LEH) is a bayfront community that connects with the Atlantic Ocean in the Little Egg Harbor Inlet. Not since the famous March Storm of 1962 had this area suffered anything like what was to come in 2011 and 2012. Hurricane Irene made landfall in the township in 2011 but was, in many ways, as counter-productive

in the response experience aspect as it was otherwise. For example, the mandatory evacuations directions were heeded by most, but in the end were basically not necessary for the "flop" the event turned out to be. In some ways, however, adverse aspects of that event turned out to have a beneficial effect on our preparedness for Sandy. For example, we considered the response by the American Red Cross (ARC) to Irene substandard, but, in the interim between then and Hurricane Sandy, we had substantial interaction with them, and this interaction

turned out to be very positive in preparing for, and responding to, Sandy. The lack of effective communications also became quite evident during Irene, and a fledgling local attempt to use social media in emergencies was born.

## Lead-up to the Event

As we on the East Coast anxiously followed the well-documented lead-up to the arrival of Sandy, landfall somewhere in our area became a certainty, and preparations began—slowly at first and then in a hurried manner. Having learned from Irene, we had all response organizations prepare readiness TO&Es (tables of organization and equipment) for those organizations. Thursday of that week, ARC shelter supplies began to flow in, which allowed us to stand up shelter operations by Sunday afternoon. Our personnel were directed to get plenty of sleep and to arrange their affairs so that they would be available as the event developed.

## The Evacuation

Our area is interspersed with highlands and lowlands, so we have learned by experience that evacuation orders are difficult to construct to address the needs intended. By October 27, 2012, we were conducting voluntary evacuations of waterfront areas and directing residents to relocate moveable assets to higher ground. Since we were very conscious of the ramifications of sheltering huge numbers of evacuees, all of the evacuation orders directed people to seek shelter with friends and family inland when possible. By October 28, all likely storm tracks put us directly in Sandy's path, and we issued mandatory evacuation orders for all waterfronts, and voluntary orders for a much larger section. Our shelter had been opened the prior evening, and it was apparent, due to the early indicators, that we would be hosting a relatively large number of residents. Calls for additional assets were constant due to perceived need and the local emergency operating center and emergency resources were stood up and, by then, were on a 24-hour a day and 7-day a week basis. By that evening, all low-lying areas were directed to mandatorily evacuate by 6:00 a.m. on October 29.

Solutions to communication problems experienced in Irene helped us greatly in our response to Sandy. We had learned to make more effective use of social media, including several Internet websites, the Nixle system, and other systems such as Global Connect through our school districts. All in all, we sent out much more than 50 communications involving storm preparation, response and remediation. We also took advantage of the local TV network under the control of one of our school systems, and even used temporary digital sign trailers to get out these critical messages during that period.

Our community responded very favorably to all of these measures. We have had a steady stream of complimentary statements due to these improvements.

By the early hours of October 29, it was apparent to me that there were a large number of residents who absolutely intended to shelter in place. This large number, I believe, was due to the mandatory evacuation/non-event that Irene had turned out to be. It was equally apparent that, with the magnitude of this event, these people faced extreme danger if they remained in place. Although we had fire trucks and police cars using loud speakers in all evacuation areas, I immediately put in urgent calls for all support that could be mustered for a larger door-to-door effort. Ocean County authorities sent us a very large contingent of Prosecutor's and Sheriff's Office personnel, and we formed into teams of four and reached virtually all areas of concern, working into the evening until the flood had risen to the point where even the largest vehicles could not function and people were literally being swept off their feet by the frigid waters and by the raging storm conditions.

The decision to wage these efforts long after conditions became marginal was difficult but, I strongly believe, correct. There is no question, having seen what I did after this, that hundreds of additional people were saved by staying in this fight as long as we did. In the end our people were reduced to requesting that residents who refused the order write their social security numbers on their arms in indelible ink, so that their bodies could be identified in the event of their death. This sobering thought alone convinced many to comply with the evacuation order.

### **The Agonizing Decision**

On October 28, we had a meeting with the leadership of all local emergency response assets. As in Irene, I told them that the situation was one of the most dire that we had ever faced and that at some point a decision may have to be made that could cost some people who had refused the order to evacuate their lives. That decision was, simply put, when was the value of continued emergency responses outweighed by the danger to the first responders and others. I told them that I would fully consult with their leaders about this critical issue, but in the end the decision would be mine alone. The gravity of this situation had been somewhat lost on me in Hurricane Irene, because it, fortunately, never came to pass in that event. Such would not be the case in Sandy. As first responders, we are conditioned that we go no matter what the circumstances. Although we were all admonished by the "tombstone courage" doctrine during our training this remains a collective mind-set that has killed many

of our colleagues, and constantly threatens to kill still more. We need look only at the selfless actions of those many heroes of the 9/11 attacks to realize we would have done exactly the same had we been in the same situation.

As conditions deteriorated further on October 29, response functions became rapidly untenable. For example, several homes on one street caught fire, one igniting the other in succession. Our firefighters, at first, valiantly attempted to suppress these using portable pumps out of small boats. The fruitlessness and danger of this effort soon became apparent, and they had to abandon it. The problems encountered in the evacuation were outlined further, and, as the evening progressed, I was forced to eventually stop all response in the areas most affected. Predictably, requests for emergency assistance continued to come from the now panicked non-evacuees, and, for a time, I could not allow our first responders to go. We all wanted to, but seeing the by-now raging storm surge waters blocking these streets, I simply could not allow it. This had a devastating effect on us all, and some people emotionally collapsed and had to be relieved.

### **Sheltering**

Assets had been marshaled at the shelter for four days prior to opening. The ARC, on this occasion, sent very competent people, and, for the most part, there were enough of them. What we did not have, we made up for by using our own highly trained Civilian Emergency Response Team (CERT) members and a very dedicated staff of local volunteers. We were, again, ably assisted with security concerns by the men and women of the Ocean County Sheriff's Department, and the facility itself was superbly cleaned and maintained by the staff of the Pinelands Regional School District. Their warehouse became our warehouse and the resupply efforts went very well. Significant donations of goods were made by one of our local markets, which had lost power, and in another part of town another became a fuel depot for our local fire companies, when their regular source became inundated. Our local supermarket and many local stores and restaurants also contributed greatly during this period of local scarcity, further helping with feeding the population of not only the shelter, but local now indigent people as well.

At its peak our shelter housed almost 800 evacuees. This facility operated in two locations for over a month; many residents traveling to their destroyed homes in the daytime and sheltering there at night. Many challenges and issues (such as crime, conflict, and the fear of a situation almost beyond the human experience) were encountered, but each was overcome in turn through a magnificent collaborative effort and the sheer grit of the people helping.

### **Return to the Front**

The hours that we could not respond in the affected areas seemed endless to us. My thoughts returned, again and again, to those in need of our help. I repeatedly checked on readiness of assets and the conditions there. At about 2:40 a.m. on October 30, it appeared that the waters had dropped somewhat and the fury of the storm had abated to some extent. I asked my public works superintendent if he thought that we could make it to the victims in high-wheeled loaders. He said that it was iffy, but yes, we might. I ordered that these vehicles, along with two 5 ton trucks and crews that had recently arrived from the NJ National Guard, proceed to embarkation points at the head of the floodwaters.

As much as we wanted to return to action, an odd thing happened at that point. I looked up into the faces of the rescuers on these huge vehicles and it occurred to me that I may well be sending those brave souls to their deaths. It is one thing to risk your own safety, but quite another to send others into a danger so manifest. As willing as they were to go, I thought of having to tell their families that my decision had killed their spouse, mother, or dad. Conditions were still less than marginal, and I believe that this is the moment that one feels the most isolated as a leader. I, frankly, briefly prayed for wisdom, and, as I looked up, I saw a very faint light flashing about a mile away over the floodwaters. My third-generation police gut then took over and off we went.

We immediately secured the flashlight victim, who was minutes away from death from hypothermia. He had ventured out into the storm to get help for his handicapped brother trapped in a nearby house. Both fortunately survived, and I was pleased to later meet with them, safe and sound in our shelter. Dozens of other victims were similarly rescued, each having their own harrowing tale of survival. We were particularly gratified that no serious injuries of first responders were noted as a result of these Herculean efforts.

We worked all through the night and, as dawn broke, we stood in a bayfront area that looked like a scene from the apocalypse. I was glad at that point most victims were not able to see what we were seeing, as we knew then that we needed to prepare those people to face what remained. We did not know it then, but some 4,000 homes, nearly half of those in Little Egg Harbor, had been damaged by floodwaters.

### **The Aftermath**

Victims were quite understandably desperate for information. They were also more than anxious to return to their homes so they could survey the damage and start the insurance claims process. Here was one of those times where the balance between

public safety and justifiable personal interest come into conflict. As it were, we allowed victims to return to the less affected areas much sooner than some other areas. I cannot say that keeping victims out of danger was without continuous difficulty or conflict. A rational, neighborhood-by-neighborhood evaluation seemed to work best for us. Some areas were clearly so compromised, and so dangerous, that we were forced to keep those closed for extended periods because of the danger and adverse effect on clearing operations that the presence of victims would cause.

The nature and amount of storm debris was incalculable. Homes were in lagoons; boats, sheds and vehicles in streets; trees, poles, and utility lines everywhere; and situations too bizarre to describe. We worked with our public works to begin the clearing process. Our superintendent was very proactive and had contracts in place and equipment staged to begin quickly. More than 425 tons per day were hauled during peak periods and, as soon as we began, it was apparent that hauling all the debris immediately to the final depository was untenable and the search for a solution began.

As bad as all the other issues appeared it soon occurred to us that perhaps the greatest danger we faced was a lack of hope. Victims literally were walking around their areas with a vacant, distant look on their faces that resembled those of war evacuees. As hard as it was for us (many were also victims of Sandy), we talked about this apathy and decided that we had to appear confident that better times were coming. This is more difficult than it seems. I had a number of conversations with my colleagues in other towns who were having similar problems, and we all realized that the worst thing we could do, as leaders, was to let the folks we were responsible for see us crack. That placed a tremendous onus on us that I don't know yet if we have fully recovered from.

I must say that it is my sincere belief that no leader has ever had a more diverse, gritty, tenacious, brave, and talented collective organization so uniquely fitted for such a task at such a time. No one person should take credit for such a thing, but merely bow his or her head and thank God for always being in the right place at the right time.

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## Brick Township

*Nils R. Bergquist, Chief, Brick Township, New Jersey, Police Department*

In addition to having the honor of being Chief of the Brick Township Police Department, I also serve as the municipal Emergency Management Coordinator. Our response to Hurricane Sandy started sev-

eral years ago with the drills and exercises we have conducted in conjunction with the police department, the fire service, and our paid and volunteer EMS.

Most notable was Operation Surf's Up, conducted 14 months prior to Sandy. This was a large-scale exercise that included the New Jersey statewide Emergency Medical Service Task Force, and the MCRU (Mass Causality Response Unit), a \$300,000 vehicle procured through a grant. Operation Surf's Up also involved the Ocean Medical Center and approximately 50 volunteers, with the New Jersey National Guard utilizing two Black Hawk Helicopters simulating evacuations from hospitals that were overcapacity as a result of a Category Five Hurricane hitting the Ocean and Monmouth Counties vicinity. During that drill, we table topped our Emergency Operation Center operations as well as the interactions with a wide variety of emergency response agencies.

As Sandy approached, we opened our Emergency Operation Center on Sunday night, hours before the storm hit on October 30. We had pulled our resources off the barrier island the afternoon of October 29—the weather conditions had deteriorated to the point that it was not safe to stay. Prior to leaving, our personnel went door to door, hitting every residence on the island, and identified approximately 20 people who were staying behind. When we marched in there on Wednesday, we found out that in fact there were more than 60 people who had stayed behind.

We had learned several years ago during one of our major snow storms to decentralize our resources. Putting those hard learned lessons to work during Sandy, we set up four task forces—one at each of the four firehouses in our township. Each task force consisted of a police component; an EMS component (either paid or volunteer); a fire component (all volunteer); and a Department of Public Works (DPW) component, which, in this case, consisted of a dump truck, a trailer with a loader or backhoe on it, manpower, chain saws, and hand tools. These teams were dispatched to calls as a unified task force, with the DPW component going out with the emergency responders to clear roadways using chains saws or the backhoes. Also, by utilizing unified command in the incident command system, each task force could operate autonomously if they lost communications with the incident commander who was stationed at the front desk at police headquarters.

The Emergency Operations Center (EOC) was also situated in the Township Municipal Building in a large conference room. In addition to police and emergency management, the Municipal Utilities Authority was represented around the clock, as was the DPW. The Purchasing Department served as our logistic section. The Board of Education was

represented most of the time, because we were utilizing their facilities for shelter, as well as their buses for transportation. The shelter and evacuation annex was staffed by police personnel during the entire operation.

We disseminated information before, during, and for months after the storm through different social media outlets, as well as the traditional media outlets.

Additionally, we established a call center for informational purposes only. The call center was staffed around the clock with non-police personnel (mostly from the Tax Office and Recreation Department), who really went above and beyond. Most of them were working well outside of their comfort zones, never having had to deal with these types of problems on the phone. Predictably the number of calls we had were nearly overwhelming at times.

During the first 36 hours of the storm, no one went home. Police and civilian personnel slept in either one of the firehouses or in the departments training room when relieved during that time. We went from call to call. Ten days in we had dealt with approximately 1,300 fire calls. When we finally started rotating some people out to get some rest - and started getting into a management routine, the National Guard arrived. At one point we had 200 National Guard troops in town. These troops greatly helped us do our job, assisting with everything from initially helping with search and rescue to staffing the evacuation centers, and, then later, to manning entry control points to all of the effected neighborhoods.

We also utilized our Community Emergency Response Team, and they did everything during the storm from helping to answer the phones and feeding the troops and our personnel to distributing water and ice and other supplies to our residents in the days following the storm.

As the storm raged, flooding prevented us from getting out to our barrier island. One hundred seven homes burned down on the island. We tried getting teams out to the island, but substantial flooding made it impossible to get there. We became aware that there were many rumors spreading throughout the community, which we spent a significant amount of time quelling. At one point we received a call from the Regional Operations and Intelligence Center asking if we in fact had 31 bodies floating in the Barnegat Bay. Fortunately this was not remotely true. We did however have one fatality during the storm a 56-year-old male drowned in his home that was flooded with more than four feet of water.

Trying to get some situational awareness on the barrier island was difficult. We had trouble finding a helicopter to get up and send us back video. We went outside of channels and made direct contact with Station Delaware Bay (United States

Coast Guard), and they diverted one of their helicopters over our area and sent us some video just before sunset, which gave us an idea of what we were dealing with on the island.

We were not able to make it onto the island until daybreak Wednesday morning. Throughout the day and into Thursday the only way to get around on the island was on foot or by off-road four-wheel drive quads. This was the case until the state Department of Transportation came in and did a wonderful job cleaning up the streets, as did the DPW, which enabled us to get our infrastructure back up and running.

The damage, destruction and danger were not confined to the island. On the mainland, Brick Township has 52 miles of waterfront property, the most in New Jersey. Approximately 10,000 of those residences were affected by flooding in one way or another.

On the mainland we encountered boats, debris, and houses swept over from the barrier island throughout our neighborhoods, which made it very difficult to handle calls or to even get around town. We immediately set up entry control points at all of those neighborhoods to prevent looting. I'm glad to say we were successful in safeguarding our residents' property in the aftermath of the storm. Looking at our property crimes in the two weeks before the storm and the two weeks following the storm, we found that there was substantially less property crime after the storm than there was in the two weeks prior. Only one incident occurred in that two- to three-week period.

Immediately after the storm, the New Jersey Emergency Medical Task Force set up facilities in a parking lot directly adjacent to the Ocean Medical Center. This was the same parking lot that they utilized during Operation Surf's Up. In fact, the tent pegs that they used for the tents went into the same holes that they used 14 months earlier during the drill.

In addition to significant and extended power outages, one of the major issues we confronted involved major traffic jams and associated traffic problems. We tried blocking intersections with cones, tape and movable barricades, none of which proved successful; people would simply move them and leave the barricades in the middle of the highway. So, at some of the less important intersections, we put school buses in between the Jersey Barriers to channel the traffic to another intersection.

Fortunately we were able to find a partial solution, with the assistance of one of our National Guard troops, an electrician in civilian life. We managed to get generators by way of the Regional Operations and Intelligence Center, and the guardsman/electrician went out with about 15 generators, opened up the traffic control boxes at

key intersections, hooked up the generators to those traffic lights, and we then set up a fuel schedule. For the next two weeks the National Guard managed those generators, keeping the traffic lights operational, and the intersections up and running.

We had declared a local state of emergency prior to the storm with a mandatory evacuation of the barrier island and a recommendation to evacuate inland coastal areas. After the storm, we quickly enhanced the local State of Emergency to keep the island off-limits for nearly a week, until we were able to make it safe for people to return. At first, we escorted representatives from each neighborhood, and then later we brought people out street by street in buses and allowed them to go in and out of their houses to secure their valuables and to make as many trips during that day on the bus as possible. We had grief counselors on all of the buses and the truck on the first trip. The local VFW post suspended all of their normal operations, and we used that site as a forward operating post for all of the repopulation efforts. Then, eventually, we slowly lifted the restrictions to allow people back on the island as the infrastructure came back on line. The storm had caused all water, natural gas, sewer, and electrical services to be completely disrupted.

As of this writing, we still have a local State of Emergency in effect, prohibiting

people who are not residents or contractors from being on the side streets of the island. No access to the beach is allowed to prevent looting. A curfew from 1900 to 0500 is in effect, and we have New Jersey State Police troopers supplementing our patrols out there as well.

## Hurricane Sandy, New Jersey's Cop 2 Cop and the New Jersey State Association of Chiefs of Police

*Cherie Castellano CSW LPC AAETS,  
Program Director, Cop 2 Cop*

**C**op 2 Cop is the first program of its kind in the country, enacted into law to focus on suicide prevention and mental health support for law enforcement officers. After a series of police suicides (1996-1998), community leaders in New Jersey believed that law enforcement professionals needed a confidential, safe outlet where they could talk to peers who could understand, offer support, and not be judgmental. In 1999, a bill was signed into law creating the Cop 2 Cop program. The hotline began accepting calls in November 2000. Cop 2 Cop is a program

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After over a decade of service and over 30,000 contacts, Cop 2 Cop has been identified as a national best practice in peer support by the Department of Defense's Centers of Excellence. Cop 2 Cop is the confidential hotline for New Jersey Law Enforcement Officers offering 24-hour/7-day a week help from colleagues who understand and can offer support to handle their immediate needs. The Cop 2 Cop hotline, 1-866-COP-2-COP, is staffed by Cop 2 Cop peer counselors who are retired officers, some who are licensed clinicians, and specially trained Mental Health professionals offering Cop 2 Cop peer support, telephone assessments, referrals to a police network of providers, and critical incident stress management services. It has been identified as a model for over a dozen programs such as Vet 2 Vet, Mom 2 Mom, and even a national military peer helpline entitled Vets4Warriors serving the entire U.S. military.

Manmade disasters and natural disasters have different kinds of traumatic impact on police officers in rescue and recovery roles. With a manmade or terrorist disaster like 9/11, although the devastation was unimaginable, it was in a targeted location and had a group of terrorists to direct anger towards. In a natural disaster, Mother Nature, or the ignorant civilian who refused to evacuate and is now forcing you as an officer to risk your life and theirs, is the problem along with the potential of widespread destruction, perhaps even reaching your safe haven, your home.

Hurricane Katrina had a tremendous impact on the New Orleans Police Department (NOPD) several years ago. After the storm, New Orleans lost two officers to suicide and the Southern Law Enforcement Foundation asked our Cop 2 Cop team to respond for support. After our experience from supporting officers involved in the events of 9/11, we believed Cop 2 Cop could handle any disaster response. We were wrong.

In New Orleans, we found officers who had lost their homes, had injury and harm within their own families, and remained at their posts rescuing others. The media never covered the stories of officers who suffered from dehydration while manning boats with bottled water because they chose not to take a sip of water that could be offered to a civilian in need. Those officers were heroic, and the storm brought out the best in them. Unfortunately, what we learned after several years from a study done by the CDC (Centers for Disease Control) after they examined symptoms of PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder) and related disorders among the NOPD who were involved in the rescue and

recovery is that, of the 912 officers surveyed, almost 45 percent reported symptoms associated with PTSD or depression. Risk factors include recovery of bodies, crowd control, assault, and injury to family members. Depressive symptoms were associated with rare family contact, uninhabitable homes, isolation from other officers in the NOPD, assault, and injury to a family member. The conclusion was that police personnel reported symptoms of PTSD and depression associated with work-related and personal factors following Hurricane Katrina.

### Hurricane Sandy

When Hurricane Sandy hit, we were fortunate to have experts in disaster and terrorism leading the state's mental health support (NJDRCC) who activated a specialized team to ensure special at-risk groups, such as police officers, could get immediate access to support. After our response to both the events of 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, we had developed legislated Disaster Mental Health Plans and SOPs (standard operating procedures) to use our lessons learned. A new helpline, a Hurricane Sandy support line called For You New Jersey First for first responders (1-866 4UN-J1ST) went live within 24 hours of the event. In addition to our Cop 2 Cop staff, the New Jersey State Police deployed a disaster response team, which included Cop 2 Cop peers, to the most impacted areas.

A pivotal shift in connecting this immediate access and focused care to our first responders post-Hurricane Sandy is found in the leadership of our law enforcement, specifically, our New Jersey chiefs of police. The New Jersey Association of Chiefs of Police invited our team immediately after the storm to share our new program at the statewide chiefs meeting and disseminated our material to ensure over 50,000 law enforcement professionals could have access to this service. Our New Jersey First team presented the programs and met with chiefs to discuss their needs following the presentation. One chief was highlighted in our presentation as he set the tone for crisis leadership and is indicative of the excellence in service in the Garden State.

That is where this story really begins with one chief and the Point Pleasant Beach Police Department. Focused on their rescue and recovery efforts, they faced a challenge of a mandatory in-service training block within a week after the storm. When the NJDCISR team visited their department to offer help, Lieutenant Joseph Michigan and Chief Kevin O'Hara suggested a block of time be changed to brief officers about the potential challenges they may experience related to Hurricane Sandy. Timing and good fortune allowed a group from Cop 2 Cop a chance to get a firsthand look at the Point Pleasant Beach Police Department, a

small department that was always looking to lend a hand to others in need.

The briefing and support was well received by the officers. In describing the department reaction, Lieutenant Michigan explained "We really got hit hard, but I think our response was proactive." The chief was enthusiastic about providing ongoing support to his officers. The department is a mix of young officers and veteran officers. Lieutenant Michigan believed it was beneficial for everyone to hear each other's reactions to what they saw and did during the response to Sandy. "These 'kids' experienced a tragedy that they had never seen before and hopefully never will again." When asked about his personal resilience he replied jokingly "I just go with the flow. You can't do anything about some things." But he and his chief recognize that you can do what they and their fellow officers did, which was use their resilience to guide their response and enlist immediate support.

In 13 major event responses and more than 50 visits to impacted area first responder agencies, Cop 2 Cop has had more than 440 contacts since beginning this project (funded through the New Jersey Division of Mental Health Disaster branch with a FEMA grant) for first responders. The New Jersey First program culminated in May 2013 with a transition of requests beyond that date being managed as part of the everyday work at Cop 2 Cop.

Hurricane Sandy and the impact on the New Jersey law enforcement community has not yet blown over. The impact of Sandy may be still felt a year away. However, in some small town, with another community in crisis, a New Jersey police officer will be quietly doing what he or she can to help, and surprising those who don't know how heroic New Jersey's law enforcement professionals truly are. And when Cop 2 Cop needs assistance in getting connected to those who most need us, we know we can rely on New Jersey's chiefs of police, and the New Jersey State Association of Chiefs of Police, to help us to lend a hand. ❖

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