



NEW JERSEY PUBLIC EMPLOYEES
OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY AND HEALTH

NJ PEOSH ALERT #36



Safety & Health Alert WATER RESCUE


This PEOSH Alert highlights the potential for death or serious injury occurring as a result of untrained personnel attempting water or ice rescue in an emergent situation.


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In September 2021 as the evening hours approached, severe storms from Hurricane Ida flooded areas of New Jersey. Flash flooding and the loss of daylight contributed to rapidly deteriorating travel conditions and resulted in civilian deaths, injuries, and significant damage to homes and property.

In one Mercer County town, police were called to assist a motorist whose vehicle was swept into rushing waters caused by flash flooding. The responding officer was caught in a flash flood and had to self-rescue from his patrol car, which was swept away into deeper water. Two additional officers dispatched to assist the first officer were also swept into the running water and effected their own self-rescues. All three officers anchored themselves to trees to await rescue, but eventually lost communications with their dispatcher.

The officers were rescued after almost two hours when rescuers heard the sounds of gunshots, as the officers fired their service weapons to lead rescuers to their location. The confluence of darkness, flooding conditions, and emergent calls for service could have resulted in tragedy; thankfully, all personnel were able to be rescued without sustaining illness or injury.

- **Swiftwater, ice, and flash floods are serious, recognized hazards which can contribute to death or serious injury.** Tree damage and flooding can entrap people in their homes and under collapsed structures. Motorists can be entrapped in submerged motor vehicles or in vehicles stuck in fast moving water. Individuals can also be swept away by flash flooding placing them at risk of drowning.



OFFICE OF PUBLIC EMPLOYEES
OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY
AND HEALTH



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- In the event of an emergency such as a flood, severe thunderstorm, tornado, or hurricane that generates a large volume of 9-1-1 calls can overwhelm specialized fully trained and equipped technical rescue teams. Workers such as **police officers, EMTs, utility workers, and public works employees may be in a position to act quickly to save a life in distress.**
- Employees who are **normally not exposed** to these hazards and **not usually required** to engage in specialized rescue activities may be in a position to rescue an individual or animal in distress during these conditions. Rescuers who do not have specialized training **must be aware** that **attempting a rescue** of a person or animal during such an event **requires appropriate technical rescue skills, techniques and equipment.**
- Employers should consult with their local Office of Emergency Management to review Emergency Operation Plans and **consider the role of non-traditional rescuers** (police, emergency medical services, public works) in responding to these emergencies.
- Resources are available to assist in training employees in hazard awareness concerning technical rescue, such as the National Fire Protection Association's Standard 1670, "Standard on Operations and Training for Technical Search and Rescue Incidents." **County fire academies and private vendors offer initial and refresher training** at the awareness, operations, and technician levels for water rescue, swift water rescue, and ice rescue.
- Departments/agencies in jurisdictions with personnel who may be assigned to perform water or ice rescue **must train personnel, at a minimum, to the awareness level.** All personnel within the department/agency **must be trained to recognize** the need for such resources, and **have a plan** to dispatch such resources to assist.