

First Responders Face Deluge of Calls in Aftermath of Florence

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*The Cypress Pointe Fire and Rescue Department conducts a water rescue operation in the **Woodlake area**. (Photograph courtesy Cypress Pointe Fire and Rescue Department)*

For the past few days, first responders across Moore County have been inundated with reports of fallen trees, flooding and other issues caused by Tropical Depression Florence.

It has been an especially taxing time for police and firefighters in northern and eastern areas of the county, where many neighborhoods and major roadways were still flooded as of Tuesday morning.

The onslaught of rain rendered several roads impassable in Robbins. Old Plank Road and South Middleton Street, two of the town's key corridors, were washed out, leaving the community with a limited number of thoroughfares.

David Lambert, the town manager, said the Robbins Fire Department, which is staffed mainly by volunteers, has responded to nearly 90 storm-related calls for service.

“They cut down trees, assisted in medical calls and even rescued a baby from a flooded road,” Lambert said.

The toddler, Lambert said, was traveling with his parents Monday morning when the family’s vehicle was “swept away” by floodwater on Cabin Creek Bridge. They escaped the vehicle and were later found clinging to a tree about 40 feet away from the bridge.

“They were clinging for their lives,” said Chief Jarius Garner of the Robbins Fire Department. “It’s a miracle they were able to hold on for so long.”



Flooded road in Robbins. (Photograph by Eden Holt for The Pilot)

Garner said Florence has caused some of the worst destruction the town has seen in decades.

“We’ve had a long week,” he said. “Everybody has been working really hard.”

Florence dumped an estimated 15 inches of rain on Vass, where firefighters used boats to reach residents stranded in flooded neighborhoods. Rescue efforts in the town were led by members of the Cypress Pointe Fire Department, the Crains Creek Fire Department and Michigan Task Force One — a team of water rescue specialists that deployed to Vass ahead of Florence.

The 20 visiting members of the task force, who slept in cots lining the floor of the Crains Creek station, brought their own equipment and rescue boats from the Great Lakes State.

“They came prepared and were great to work with,” said Chief Kenneth Mackey of the Crains Creek Fire Department.

Mackey said 24 residents and 31 animals had been retrieved from waterlogged neighborhoods along Crains Creek as of Tuesday. The creek connects to Little River, which Mackey said has swelled to levels not seen since Hurricane Matthew in 2016.

For embattled homeowners in the gated Woodlake subdivision, Florence triggered a sense of déjà vu.

Lake Surf, the community’s 1,200-acre centerpiece, was drained after Hurricane Mathew nearly breached the lake’s deteriorated dam in 2016. The state later breached the dam in an effort to prevent water from pooling in the empty impoundment, but the dam’s breach left Lake Surf vulnerable to flooding from Little River over the weekend.

And so firefighters were once again summoned to rescue homeowners from flooded pockets of the subdivision. Charlie Jones, a longtime Woodlake resident, said all paths to the community were flooded on Sunday.

“Some residents now have no way to safely exit the development,” Jones said.



Members of Michigan Task Force 1 have a team meeting at Crains Creek Fire Department on Saturday. (Jaymie Baxley/The Pilot)

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To better handle the influx of Florence-related 911 calls, Moore County Public Safety established an Emergency Operations Center in Carthage last week. According to a dispatcher, the center had received “hundreds and hundreds” of calls as of Tuesday morning.

First responders stepped up to the plate for non-emergencies, too. The Southern Pines Police Department opened its community room for residents who needed to charge their phones or connect to the station’s WiFi.

While no serious storm-related injuries have been reported in the Sandhills, at least 24 deaths have been confirmed in North Carolina since Friday in connection with Florence.