

Riding the Storm Out

A public health story from...

Springfield-Greene County Health Department

In times of crisis, special care centers help seniors and the disabled survive.



Virgil Phillips, 101 and his wife, Tommie, 93, awoke to the sound of cracking trees that frigid January morning. A

crippling ice storm lashed Springfield, Mo., causing massive power

outages, tying up highways, streets and airports. The couple knew something bad was happening, but remained hostage inside their modest home, unable to negotiate a path to safety. They huddled and clung together for warmth, praying the trees would not fall on them.

By afternoon, a concerned neighbor rescued and drove them to the emergency room at St. John's Hospital, unsure of where else to go. By then, Virgil, who needs a walker to ambulate, was moaning and feeling poorly. But the hospital was understaffed and under siege because many of its employees failed to show, and said the couple's non-emergency needs could be better met at a special care center. Three had sprung into action during the storm's weeklong

stranglehold, thanks to the Springfield-Greene County Health Department. Their mission: to shelter the elderly and disabled, and others without caregivers, who had medical or social needs, but were not sick enough for a hospital or nursing home.

Six thousand people eventually found warmth, food, bathing facilities, and medical care in one of the centers.

"These individuals had nowhere else to go," says Kevin Gipson, director of the Springfield-Greene County Health Department. "They live life on the edge and one calamity like an ice storm can push them right over."

Gipson and his small staff worked round the clock with Cox and St. John's Hospitals, and public transit, to transport those with special needs to the centers. "Many came in without their medicine, so we worked with pharmacies to provide it," Gipson said. "It was a huge challenge. So was oxygen. Many needed breathing devices and oxygen tanks, so we worked with local hospitals to find suppliers."

The centers saved Virgil's and Tommie's life, and countless others, says Gipson. "No doubt about it. They had nowhere else to turn and the emergency rooms were overrun."

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