

LOCAL NEWS

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New PA program provided \$125,000 to help 20 Berks families with home repairs, rental assistance, following July 2023 severe floods

Catastrophic storm failed to meet threshold for federal disaster declaration.



Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency Director Randy Padfield discusses the Disaster Recovery Assistance Program that aided victims of the July 2023 flooding of the Antietam Creek during a press conference Friday, Jan. 17, 2025, at the Berks County Department of Emergency Services, 2561 Bernville Road, Bern Township. With

Padfield from left are state Sen. Judy Schwank, Berks County Department of Emergency Services Director Brian Gottschall and Pennsylvania Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster President Julia Frank. (BILL UHRICH/READING EAGLE).



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The damage caused by catastrophic flooding in several municipalities in Berks County after 5 to 8 inches of rain fell the afternoon of July 9, 2023, was impressive by almost any measure.

“In some of the most extreme cases,” Sen. Judy Schwank recalled Friday, “you had to literally see it to believe how bad it was.”

Schwank witnessed the effects of the flash flooding the next morning, when she and county and local elected leaders and Antietam School District officials accompanied Gov. Josh Shapiro and Emergency Management Secretary Randy Padfield on a tour of Lower Alsace Township and Mount Penn, where some of the worst destruction took place.

Members of the group needed to tread carefully as the edges of a street had been washed away by floodwater from Antietam Creek.

**MICHELLE LYNCH - READING EAGLE**

An auto detailing shop leans precariously over Antietam Creek in Lower Alsace Township after part of the embankment was washed away during flash flooding July , 2023. (Michelle Lynch – Reading Eagle)

In northern Berks, the wall of a foundation of a Maiden creek Township home collapsed and a neighbor's backyard shed was carried away by floodwater from Willow Creek and deposited in a field across the road.

A couple of miles away, in Fleetwood Community Park, a pedestrian bridge over the creek was ripped from its abutments and mud and vegetation covered the bleachers.

As many as 182 homes were damaged to some degree by the flooding. The flood-damaged Antietam Middle-Senior High building remains unusable, forcing the district to reconfigure its grade allocation among existing facilities.



State Sen. Judy Schwank discusses the Disaster Recovery Assistance Program that aided victims of the July 2023 flooding of the Antietam Creek during a press conference Friday, Jan. 17, 2025, at the Berks County Department of Emergency Services, 2561 Bernville Road, Bern Township. With Schwank from left are Berks County Department of Emergency Services Director Brian Gottschall and Pennsylvania Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster President Julia Frank. (BILL UHRICH/READING EAGLE).

**BILL UHRICH - READING EAGLE**

Gov. Josh Shapiro inspects the Antietam Middle Senior High School on July 10, 2023, the day after nearly 8 inches of rain in the headwaters of Antietam Creek caused devastating flash flooding in Lower Alsace Township, Mount Penn and several other Berks County communities. (Bill Uhrich – Reading Eagle)

Talk about impact.

“This event was unlike any I have seen in my 32 years of emergency management,” Berks County Department of Emergency Services Director Brian Gottschall said Friday, “not due to its scale but exactly opposite—due to its localized nature.”

Officials were doing assessment even before the emergency phase of the recovery was under way, hopeful to collect enough data to trigger federal disaster aid, Gottschall said.

As data came in from municipal partners, however, their optimism faded.

“Our experience in recovery operations reminded us that the triggers for this kind of assistance are based on high dollars and large numbers of impacted persons, generally numbers that are only arrived at in a multi-county incident,” Gottschall said.

Storm damage was only catastrophic in a few communities within Berks. While Berks didn't qualify for direct federal aid, county emergency management officials were able to secure a small business administration disaster declaration that opened the door to low interest loans to assist people who qualified.

Gottschall joined Schwank and the PEMA secretary at a media event Friday to discuss recovery efforts 18 months after the devastating flooding. The main purpose was to acclaim a new state-funded program designed to fill gaps in the disaster recovery assistance safety network.

Severe, highly localized storms that don't achieve the threshold for federal assistance are happening with greater frequency in recent years, Padfield said.

"When this happens, these individuals have very few options for personal recovery, especially considering that normal homeowners' insurance does not cover flooding events, which many homeowners do not understand until they're impacted by a flooding," the PEMA secretary said.

The Disaster Recovery Assistance Program, or DRAP, that piloted in Berks uses state dollars to provide grants for eligible expenses for individuals impacted by disasters that either are not able to qualify for low interest loans through the SBA or meet certain income eligibility criteria.

It provides up to \$10,000 for expenses related to home repairs, temporary housing or rental expenses, and essential personal items.

The program may be activated by the governor when the state receives a disaster declaration from the SBA.

DRAP complements the efforts of the many voluntary organizations who are normally the first organizations that assist individuals and families with recovery after a disaster strikes.

Since the July 2023 flooding in Berks, DRAP has been authorized six times across the state, assisting a total of 51 families by reimbursing nearly \$270,000 worth of eligible expenses.

In Berks, there were 20 approved applications for individuals for the July 2023 event and they were reimbursed a total of \$125,000."

“On average, that’s about \$6,245 per applicant,” Padfield said, “which interestingly enough, is about \$1000 more than the average FEMA individual assistance grant when federal aid actually is made available.”

That amount may seem like a drop in the bucket in terms of need, Gottschall said, but it is only one piece of the recovery puzzle.

“My experience has taught me a valuable lesson ... that recovery post-disaster is rarely achieved in one vast action,” he said. “It is generally accomplished through many compounding contributions, including government at all levels, the impacted persons and families, and their friends and support mechanisms, as well as faith-based and community groups that engage in the interests of the local community and those affected.”



Berks County Department of Emergency Services Director Brian Gottschall discusses the Disaster Recovery Assistance Program that aided victims of the July 2023 flooding of the Antietam Creek during a press conference Friday, Jan. 17, 2025, at the Berks County Department of Emergency Services, 2561 Bernville Road, Bern Township. With Gottschall from left are Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency Director Randy Padfield and state Sen. Judy Schwank. (BILL UHRICH/READING EAGLE).

Padfield and Schwank thanked many volunteers and community-based organizations who have been instrumental in helping to carrying out and improving the program. Julia Frank of Pennsylvania of Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster represented them at the press conference.

She said her umbrella group helped support local community partners such as Pennside Presbyterian Church, Antietam Valley Community Partnership, Berks County Lutheran Churches, and St. Paul’s United Church of Christ, Amityville. Together, they made up what became known as the Antietam Valley Long Term Recovery Group.

“Recovery for individuals and families adversely impacted by disasters and other emergencies is a journey,” Padfield said. “It requires a whole community approach to ensure a holistic recovery. Each individual’s or family’s needs are different, and their path of recovery may be different.

“However, the one thing that everyone needs most after a disaster is hope.”

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