

More than 45 dead after Ida's remnants blindsided Northeast

A stunned U.S. East Coast is facing a sobering death toll, surging rivers, tornado damage and continuing calls for rescue after the remnants of Hurricane Ida walloped the region with record-breaking rain.



The Associated Press - People view a flooded street in Philadelphia, Thursday, Sept. 2, 2021 in the aftermath of downpours and high winds from the remnants of Hurricane Ida that hit the area. (AP Photo/Matt Rourke)

NEW YORK — A stunned U.S. East Coast faced a rising death toll, surging rivers and tornado damage Thursday after the remnants of Hurricane Ida walloped the region with record-breaking rain, drowning more than 40 people in their homes and cars.

In a region that had been warned about potentially deadly flash flooding but hadn't braced for such a blow from the no-longer-hurricane, the storm killed at least 46 people from Maryland to Connecticut on Wednesday night and Thursday morning.

At least 23 people died in New Jersey, Democratic Gov. Phil Murphy said. At least 13 people were killed in New York City, police said, 11 of them in flooded basement apartments, which often serve as relatively affordable homes in one of the nation's most expensive housing markets. Suburban Westchester County reported three deaths.

Officials said at least five people died in Pennsylvania, including one killed by a falling tree and another who drowned in his car after helping his wife to escape. A Connecticut state police sergeant, Brian Mohl, perished after his cruiser was swept away. Another death was reported in Maryland.

Sophy Liu said she tried using towels and garbage bags to stop the water coming into her first-floor New York City apartment, but the flood rose to her chest in just a half hour. She roused her son from bed, put him in a life jacket and inflatable swimming ring and tried to flee, but the door stuck. She called two friends who helped her jar it loose.

"I was obviously scared, but I had to be strong for my son. I had to calm him down," she recalled Thursday as medical examiners removed three bodies from a home down her Queens street.

In another part of Queens, water rapidly filled Deborah Torres' first-floor apartment to her knees as her landlord frantically urged her neighbors below — among them a toddler — to get out, she said. But the water rushed in so strongly that she surmised they weren't able to open the door. The three residents died.

"I have no words," she said. "How can something like this happen?"

Ida's soggy remnants merged with a storm front and soaked the Interstate 95 corridor, meteorologists said. Similar weather has followed hurricanes before, but experts said it was slightly exacerbated by climate change — warmer air holds more rain — and urban settings, where expansive pavement prevents water from seeping into the ground.

The National Hurricane Center had warned since Tuesday of the potential for "significant and life-threatening flash flooding" and major river flooding in the mid-Atlantic region and New England.

Still, New York Gov. Kathy Hochul and New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio said

the storm's strength took them by surprise.

"We did not know that between 8:50 and 9:50 p.m. last night, that the heavens would literally open up and bring Niagara Falls level of water to the streets of New York," said Hochul, a Democrat who became governor last week after former Gov. Andrew Cuomo resigned.

De Blasio, also a Democrat, said he'd gotten a forecast Wednesday of 3 to 6 inches (7.5 to 15 cm) of rain for the day. The city's Central Park ended up getting 3.15 inches in just one hour, surpassing the previous one-hour high of 1.94 inches (5 cm) during Tropical Storm Henri on Aug. 21.

Wednesday's storm ultimately dumped over 9 inches (23 cm) of rain in parts of New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts and Rhode Island, and nearly as much on New York City's Staten Island.

In Washington, President Joe Biden assured Northeast residents that federal first responders were on the ground to help clean up.

In New York, nearly 500 vehicles were abandoned on flooded highways, garbage bobbed in streaming streets and water cascaded into the city's subway tunnels, trapping at least 17 trains and disrupting service all day. Videos online showed riders standing on seats in swamped cars. All were safely evacuated, with police aiding 835 riders and scores of people elsewhere, including a 94-year-old man on a highway, Chief of Department Rodney Harrison said.

At one Queens development, neighbors unsuccessfully tried for an hour to save a 48-year-old woman after water broke through the glass patio door of her basement apartment, trapping her in 6 feet (2 meters) of water.

"She was screaming, 'Help me, help me, help me!' We all came to her aid, trying to get her out," said the building's assistant superintendent, Jayson Jordan, but "the thrust of the water was so strong."

Residents said they have complained for years about flooding on another Queens street, where a woman and her 22-year-old son died in a basement apartment. Her husband and the couple's other son were spared only because they stepped out to move a car, next-door neighbor Lisa Singh said.

"No one should have to go this way. I feel like this was 100% avoidable," she said.

Police were still going door-to-door in flooded areas Thursday evening and didn't have a firm number of unaccounted-for people, Harrison said.

In Elizabeth, New Jersey, rain and river flooding in an apartment complex killed four people and forced 600 from their homes, Mayor J. Christian Bollwage said.

Greg Turner, who lives elsewhere in the northern New Jersey city, said his 87-year-old mother started calling 911 when water began rising in her apartment at 8 p.m. He and his brother couldn't get there because of the deluge.

As midnight approached, the water reached her neck, he said. Rescuers finally cut through the floor of the apartment above and pulled her to safety.

"She lost everything," Turner said as he headed to a bank for money to buy his mother clothes and shoes.

In New Jersey's Milford Borough, authorities said they found a man's body in a car buried up to its hood in dirt and rocks.

The National Weather Service said the ferocious storm also spawned at least 10 tornadoes from Maryland to Massachusetts, including a 150-mph (241 kph) twister that splintered homes and toppled silos in Mullica Hill, New Jersey, south of Philadelphia.

"It just came through and ripped," said resident Jeanine Zubrzycki, 33, who hid in her basement with her three children as their house shook and lights flickered.

"And then you could just hear people crying," said Zubrzycki, 33, whose home was damaged but livable.

Record flooding along the Schuylkill River in Pennsylvania inundated homes, highways and commercial buildings, even as meteorologists warned that rivers likely won't crest for a few more days. The riverside community of Manayunk remained largely under water.

The Schuylkill reached levels not seen in over 100 years in Philadelphia, where firefighters were still getting calls about minor building collapses and people stuck in flooded cars Thursday morning. The managers of a 941-unit apartment complex near the river ordered residents to evacuate, citing "deteriorating" conditions after water rushed into the parking garage and pool areas.

In suburban Bucks County, several firefighters had to be rescued after floodwaters pinned a rescue boat against a bridge pier, state emergency management director Randy Padfield said.

Others were unable to escape the floods, including Donald Bauer, who was driving home to Perkiomenville with his wife after attending their daughter's volleyball game at DeSales University, near Allentown.

Their SUV stalled in the water and floated into a house, breaking the back window, said Darby Bauer, who was on the phone with his parents when the engine died. Donald Bauer helped his wife, Katherine, escape out the broken window and urged her to go, their son said.

She clung to a tree and watched the rising waters carry the SUV out of sight, he said. She was rescued about an hour later and hospitalized.

Donald Bauer, a 65-year-old retired school bus driver, "had one of the biggest hearts we knew," his son said. "He was selfless down to his last act."

Authorities used boats to rescue people in places from North Kingstown, Rhode Island, to Frederick County, Maryland, where 10 children and a driver were pulled from a school bus.

On Sunday, Ida struck Louisiana as the fifth-strongest storm to ever hit the U.S. mainland, leaving 1 million people without power, maybe for weeks.

Porter reported from Elizabeth, New Jersey. Contributing were AP reporters Karen Matthews and Michael R. Sisak in New York; Seth Borenstein and Darlene Superville in Washington; Mark Pratt in Waltham, Massachusetts; in New Jersey, Maryclaire Dale in Mullica Hill, Michael Catalini and Shawn Marsh in Trenton, and Wayne Parry in Point Pleasant; in Connecticut, Dave Collins in Hartford and Pat Eaton-Robb in Columbia; and in Pennsylvania, Claudia Lauer in Philadelphia, Mark Scolforo in Harrisburg and Michael Rubinkam in northeastern Pennsylvania.

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