



TOWN OF WARRENTON

OFFICE OF EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

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AFTER ACTION REPORT

EVENT NAME: Winter Storm Fern
REPORT DATE: March 4, 2026
PREPARED BY: Johnny H. Switzer, Emergency Management Coordinator

1. Executive Summary

After Action Review (AAR) Meeting

A formal After Action Review was held on March 2, 2026, at the PATH Foundation. The collaborative session was a great success, bringing together key stakeholders to evaluate the Town's response. During the review, participants identified **communication** as the number one area of success throughout the event. Conversely, as the Town looks to build resilience for future events, **communication and staffing** were simultaneously identified as the primary areas requiring the most improvement.

Overview of Event

An arctic cold front crossed the area during the night of January 23, 2026, and into the morning of January 24. Temperatures dropped into the teens with dew points between 0 and -15°F by the morning of the 24th. Subtropical moisture became established and overran the arctic airmass in place from Texas to the mid-Atlantic.

Light to occasionally moderate snow began during the evening of the 24th. Warmer air aloft changed the precipitation to sleet by the morning of the 25th. With very cold surface temperatures, snow and sleet immediately accumulated on ground surfaces, and precipitation continued throughout the day. A weak low-pressure system formed off the North Carolina coast and tracked north-northeast just off the Virginia coast, turning precipitation into liquid rain/freezing rain during the evening hours. Historical data indicates freezing rain continued through 11:00 PM on the 25th, ending around midnight.

The National Weather Service reported total snowfall for Warrenton between 3.5 and 4 inches, with sleet accumulations of 5–6 inches and ice accumulations no higher than 0.25 inches. Skies during the early morning hours of the 26th were cloudy to mostly cloudy, with temperatures remaining in the mid-20s.

Summary of Key Impacts

The National Weather Service issued a Winter Storm Warning for the region, predicting downed trees and widespread power outages across the Central Piedmont Region. A Local State of Emergency was declared on January 22 in the Town of Warrenton. Additionally, Governor Spanberger declared a State of Emergency for the Commonwealth in advance of the storm.

High-Level Findings & Major Recommendations

1. **Critical Infrastructure & Equipment Dependency**
 - **Analysis:** The Town's ability to maintain primary emergency routes was entirely dependent on a small group of assets and staff. Crews from Refuse, Utilities, and other departments had to cross-staff the snow removal operations.
 - **Finding:** This represents a high-risk single point of failure.
2. **Access & Functional Needs (AFN) Vulnerability**
 - **Analysis:** The physical barrier of 6+ inches of ice-capped snow created a "mobility stalemate." Elderly and AFN residents reached a point of physical exhaustion, while attempting to clear their own egress points.
 - **Finding:** Emergency response had to pivot from recovery to labor-intensive welfare checks. First responders were diverted to perform manual labor (digging out trapped residents).
3. **Strategic Mobility & Pedestrian Access**
 - **Analysis:** While "Priority 1" roads were maintained, secondary residential streets and town sidewalks remained impassable for the duration of the 150-hour freeze.
 - **Finding:** The lack of sidewalk clearance effectively severed pedestrian access to essential services (pharmacies/groceries). This creates a "trapped" population in residential areas who may not have 4WD vehicles but require access to life-sustaining supplies. This was further complicated by the absence of the on-call snow removal contractor. This was removed from the FY26 budget, and the Public Works staff has had to absorb routes that were typically assigned to contracted crews.
4. **Administrative & Organizational Sustainability**
 - **Analysis:** Since the 2025 designation of the Emergency Management Agency (EMA) as an independent body, the program has lacked a dedicated Full-Time Equivalent (FTE). The Coordinator was forced to split focus between critical Fleet/Facilities repairs and strategic Emergency Management.
 - **Finding:** The current "dual-hat" staffing model is unsustainable. The administrative burden of state/federal reimbursement (60%–75% cost-share) and the operational demands of a 24-hour storm cycle require a dedicated lead to prevent service delays and financial loss.

2. Incident Overview

- **Event Timeline:** Storm onset January 25 (early morning hours), major precipitation ends January 25 (11:00 PM), storm recovery period starts January 26.
- **Weather Conditions:** Total snowfall accumulation 3.5–4”, sleet 5–6”, and ice accumulations 0.25–0.50” (Source: National Weather Service).
- **Affected Areas:** Mid-Atlantic Region, including Warrenton and Fauquier County.
- **Emergency Declarations:** State of Emergency declared by Virginia Governor Spanberger and Interim Town Manager Martino.

3. Response Objectives

Primary Goals: Snow and ice control, life safety, infrastructure protection, continuity of services, and maintaining operational readiness for emergency response.

Agencies and Organizations Involved

- **Town of Warrenton:**
 - Community Development
 - Department of Public Works
 - Department of Public Utilities
 - Emergency Management
 - Fleet & Facilities Management
 - Finance Department
 - Human Capital & Risk Management
 - Information Technology
 - Parks & Recreation
 - Town Manager’s Office
 - Warrenton Police Department
 - Warrenton Volunteer Fire Department
- **Fauquier County:**
 - County Administrator's Office
 - Department of Social Services
 - Fauquier Schools
 - Fire/Rescue & Emergency Management
 - Sheriff’s Department
- **External Partners:**
 - Columbia Gas
 - Christ In Action
 - Department of Defense – Warrenton Training Center
 - Dominion Energy
 - Team Rubicon
 - The Bridge Canteen Unit
 - National Weather Service
 - Virginia Department of Emergency Management

4. Operational Summary

Winter Storm Fern was met with a proactive and highly coordinated inter-departmental response. Anticipating heavy snowfall and a subsequent week-long deep freeze, the Interim Town Manager declared a Local State of Emergency on January 22, two days before the first flakes fell. This preparation allowed for the immediate mobilization of resources and a rigorous staffing schedule to ensure continuous public safety and service.

Operational Staffing & Continuity

The response was characterized by a disciplined shift in operations:

- **Emergency Phase (Sat, Jan 24 – Wed, Jan 28):** All essential departments, including Public Works, Police, and Emergency Management, entered 24-hour staffing rotations. This ensured an immediate response to the sleet and the onset of "snow-crete" conditions.
- **Recovery Phase (Thu, Jan 29 – Sat, Feb 1):** As primary routes stabilized, operations transitioned to a 12-hour daytime shift to focus on secondary road clearance, pedestrian accessibility, and infrastructure assessment.

Departmental Preparedness & Action

- **Public Works & Utilities:**
 - **Pre-Event Mobilization:** Activated Snow Emergency Routes 12 hours prior to the storm's arrival.
 - **Strategic Deployment:** The FY26 Wheel Loader was the cornerstone of the response, proving decisive in breaking through ice accumulations that standard plows could not manage.
 - **Utility Resilience:** Maintained utility uptime for water and sewer systems despite 150+ hours of subfreezing temperatures.
- **Public Safety:**
 - **Police Department:** Managed a surge in calls for service (wellness checks, stuck vehicles, traffic safety) while maintaining a constant street presence.
- **Emergency Management & Coordination:**
 - **Leadership:** The Emergency Management Coordinator provided overall situational awareness and regional coordination throughout the 24-hour operational period.
 - **Communications:** Activated AlertWarrenton! and the community hotline to maintain transparency.
- **Human Capital & Risk Management**
 - **Risk Mitigation:** Monitored workplace safety during 24-hour rotations and adjusted pre-treatment strategies to balance roadway safety with environmental stewardship.
- **Parks & Recreation:**
 - **Community Welfare:** Successfully operated warming centers at Town Hall and the WARF to support residents facing power outages.

5. Observations & Analysis

Observation 1: Critical Equipment Dependency (Single-Point Failure)

- **Analysis:** During the 150-hour freeze, primary emergency route maintenance depended on a small pool of assets. The FY26 Wheel Loader was the sole mechanical asset capable of penetrating "snow-crete." Furthermore, maintaining 24-hour operations required cross-staffing from non-transportation departments.
- **Impact:** This created a dual-layered single point of failure. A mechanical breakdown or operator exhaustion would have paralyzed primary route clearance, leaving emergency corridors vulnerable to total blockage.
- **Area for Improvement (Fleet and Personnel Redundancy):**
 - **Fleet:** Continue to invest in the Fleet Replacement Plan to procure heavy-duty snow/ice-clearing attachments compatible with existing Town vehicles.
 - **Staffing:** Re-establish reserve funds in the FY27 budget for on-call contractors. Public Works should establish a multi-year staffing program to ensure employee availability for essential operations.

Observation 2: Secondary Road and Pedestrian Stalemate

- **Analysis:** While "Priority 1" main arteries remained passable, residential secondary roads and town sidewalks remained under a solid ice cap for the duration of the event.
- **Impact:** This resulted in a mobility stalemate for residents in residential hills and cut off pedestrian access to essential services, disproportionately affecting those without 4WD vehicles or limited mobility.
- **Area for Improvement (Strategic Outsourcing):** Review the Public Works budget to include pre-negotiated contracts for private snow removal, acting as "force multipliers" for secondary streets and sidewalks.

Observation 3: Administrative & Operational Capacity (EMA Oversight)

- **Analysis:** Since achieving independent agency designation in April 2025, the EMA has faced a critical staffing gap. The current Coordinator balances EMA duties against their primary responsibilities as Fleet and Facilities Manager.
- **Impact:** This "dual-hat" structure created significant prioritization conflicts during the 150-hour freeze (e.g., technical fleet oversight vs. strategic disaster management), resulting in service delays and an unsustainable workload.
- **Area for Improvement (Dedicated EMA Staffing):** Evaluate refilling the Emergency Management FTE to eliminate the systemic vulnerability of relying on a part-time or secondary-duty model.

Observation 4: Administrative Burden of Reimbursement

- **Analysis:** Although the Town is eligible for 60%–75% state and federal cost-sharing, the current manual method of logging personnel hours and equipment run-times is prone to significant data gaps.
- **Impact:** The chaos of 24-hour shift rotations increases the likelihood of "lost" reimbursable expenses. Inaccurate documentation could result in a significant loss of recovered funds.
- **Area for Improvement (Digital Asset Tracking):** Implement an electronic-based tracking system for disaster-related labor and equipment to ensure real-time, audit-ready data. This should be integrated into the new Enterprise Asset Management module of the Tyler Munis ERP system.

Observation 5: Community Vulnerability (AFN & Elderly Populations)

- **Analysis:** The accumulation of 6+ inches of snow, capped by sleet and ice, created a physical barrier. Residents within the Access and Functional Needs (AFN) community reached total physical exhaustion or complete immobilization while attempting to clear pathways.
- **Impact:** Emergency response pivoted from infrastructure recovery to labor-intensive welfare operations. First responders were diverted to manually "dig out" trapped residents, slowing general recovery efforts.
- **Area for Improvement (AFN-Prioritized Response Teams):** Formalize a Vulnerable Resident Registry (AFN Registry) and establish a "Strike Team" model pairing municipal assets with local volunteer groups to prioritize snow and ice removal for these households.

6. Lessons Learned

- **The Communication Paradox:** As highlighted in the March 2nd AAR meeting at the PATH Foundation, inter-agency and public communication was our greatest success during the storm. However, scaling those communication strategies across all internal departments—alongside managing severe staffing shortages—remains our most critical area for improvement going forward.
- **Capital Investment Pays Dividends:** The FY26 Loader proved that modern, heavy-duty internal assets are more effective and reliable than relying on outsourced contractors or undersized equipment during historic icing events.
- **"Snow-crete" Requires Specialized Removal Methods:** Standard removal methods are insufficient for 6+ inches of sleet followed by subfreezing temperatures. The Town must develop contingency plans for these rare events.
- **Documentation is Recovery:** Establishing a "real-time" logging protocol for all departments during a Local State of Emergency is vital for maximizing the estimated \$250,000 fiscal recovery.
- **Proactive Community Care:** The success of the warming centers highlighted the need for a formalized "Resident Emergency Support Plan" including pre-identified volunteers and transport for vulnerable populations.

Updated Improvement Plan

| Issue | Corrective Action | Responsible Party | Timeline |
|-------------------------------------|--|--------------------------|-----------------|
| Equipment Redundancy | Develop a snow equipment deployment plan. | Public Works | FY27 |
| Sidewalks Snow Removal | Update the outdated Town Code. | Public Works | Winter 2026 |
| Reimbursement Gaps | Implement a cost-tracking feature in the new ERP system for FEMA storms. | Finance/OEM | Q3 FY27 |
| Grid Instability | Conduct backup power audit for all critical facilities. | Facilities/OEM | Q4 FY26 |
| Staffing & Communication | Review internal communication protocols and cross-departmental staffing plans based on AAR feedback. | OEM / All Depts | Q4 FY26 |