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## **Virginia Law Enforcement: A Commitment to Community**

**By: Crystal L. Edwards**

The town was dark and quiet. All you could hear was the “thud, thud, thud” of helicopters flying overhead and all you could see were the search lights from those helicopters scouring the downtown area for looters. Even the paper mill was silent. The sound of steam being released had ceased the night before. There was an eerie calm in the air, a calm that should not have been. This was not the typical calm before the storm, but the peculiar calm after the storm of hurricane Floyd.

Just the day before on September 16, 1999, the rains from hurricane Floyd dropped with such intensity it caused the Blackwater River to rise approximately thirty feet above normal, fifteen feet above flood stage. The downtown area of Franklin was home to neighborhoods, shopping, and the police and fire/rescue departments. The town newspaper later reported that as the waters increased the police and fire/rescue personnel were able to save the emergency vehicles from the flood. These brave individuals and volunteers also continued to try to save other police equipment and files while standing knee deep in the contaminated rising water. Police, fire/rescue, and volunteers worked through the first night diligently trying to evacuate all of the downtown residents, many leaving their homes with only the clothes on their backs. Many Franklin natives thought the waters would never rise more than they did in 1940; therefore, some businesses had

left their daily deposits in their stores, jewelry stores placed their entire inventory of fine jewelry in the store's safe and left for the day, and one furniture store that did expect the worst worked for hours trying to place as much inventory on the second floor only to find out weeks later that the saturated downstairs caused the furniture upstairs to mold and mildew. Within twenty-four hours the downtown area of Franklin, VA was under fifteen feet of water. The water was tainted with raw sewage, dead animals, pesticides, fuel oil, and other unknown contaminants. The awful smells permeated the air. Homes and businesses were destroyed. Very few had flood insurance.

The word spread that inoculations were recommended for anyone who came in contact with the floodwater. Telephones were out; the telephone station was located downtown. Cell phone use was at a minimum; Franklin had only a few cell towers and those could not handle all of the calls. By mid-morning of the second day the television stations had finally begun broadcasting the devastation in Franklin. The Franklin police department had requested cell phones only be used in case of emergency and the TV news gave the number of the cell phone that would reach the relocated police department.

As soon as other communities heard what had happened in the community of Franklin, volunteers and help came streaming in. Police officers from other communities gave up their days off to volunteer to give relief and aid to our local police department and community. With the added help, our police department was able to get more control around the flood area. During the first twenty-four hours of the flood there were no restrictions to keep onlookers from the contaminated waters, now there was crime tape attached to poles, trees, and school buses to block the roads and kept the curious crowds away from the dangerously tainted water. Police officers from communities all over

Virginia and the east coast were keeping the area safe and now Franklin was a part of **their** community. By September 18, the river had crested and within two weeks the water was gone. Buildings were torn down; neighborhoods were destroyed. The clean up took months.

Whenever a disaster occurs a community comes together to support each other and help each other. Our “community” is not just where we live, but where we are needed. This is also true for all police and sheriff’s departments across our great nation. A law enforcement department may be located in a specific town or neighborhood, but when someone is in need the community they serve can be as large as the world itself. The greatest example of this occurred after the September 11, 2001 disaster. Members of law enforcement from all over the world, including our police department, gave up their free time to help out in New York City. In just a few terrible hours on that day, New York City had become and still is part of **everyone’s** community.