

State prisoners help remove tornado debris in Diamond

By Frank Vaisvilas Correspondent December 10, 2013

DIAMOND — Inmates didn't seem to mind the bone-chilling cold Tuesday as they helped remove tons of debris left behind from the violent tornado that tore through the village of Diamond last month.

And, likewise, local officials didn't mind the help from the Illinois Department of Corrections, which sent more than a dozen inmates from Stateville, Sheridan and Pontiac prisons to help.

"I think it's phenomenal the Department of Corrections is out here," said Diamond Mayor Teresa Kernc. "I did not know we could do this."

More than 20 tornadoes touched ground across Illinois during a severe weather outbreak on Nov. 17, according to the National Weather Service. Locally, parts of Coal City, Diamond, Manhattan Township and Frankfort bore the brunt of the storm damage.

Clean-up efforts are still underway, nearly a month later.

For Diamond, paying a contractor to remove the pile of storm debris would have cost about \$46,000 — a hefty sum for a town of just more than 2,500 residents, the mayor said.

"That's a pretty serious blow to our budget," Kernc said. But IDOC inmates do it free of charge to the small village.

The inmates were carefully selected through a thorough background check to minimize the risk of any incident, such as an attempted escape.

Lt. John Eilers, who was guarding the inmates on the work detail, said the prisoners chosen were all nonviolent offenders and have less than four years remaining to serve in their sentences.

The inmates were not in any restraints and worked alongside workers from the Illinois Department of Transportation and employees from public works departments from various towns.

Kernc said she was not concerned about safety because the prisoners were well-managed. She even fed them lunch from Taco Bell and KFC.

“They were all sweet as can be,” Kernc said.

The inmates could be in the area for the next couple of weeks cleaning up the debris which stretches for about a mile throughout an unfinished residential subdivision. Eilers said authorities likely won’t use the same inmates every day, and they have a pool of inmates from which they can tap.

Eilers said the prisoners could not be identified because of security reasons, such as family members wanting to come see them in an unscheduled visit.

But one burly inmate said he enjoyed working outside because it’s better than “wasting time” at the detention center.

“It’s good for the community and it’s good in God’s eyes,” he said.

Eilers said the inmates are learning valuable lessons about helping the community and learning good work ethics.

“One goal of the program is to prepare them for reentering society,” Eilers said.

He added the community also benefits because extra tax dollars don’t have to go toward the clean up work that needs to be done. Crews of state prison inmates also helped with storm cleanup in Gifford and Brookport, tallying 831 hours of work in the two communities, according to an agency press release.

The debris the inmates were working on Tuesday once littered many of the roads in Diamond after dozens of homes were damaged or destroyed by the tornado. Workers cleared the debris from the streets and were permitted to move the wreckage to the unfinished development just north of Spring Road.

The roads reopened two days after the storm, but now the village needed help to transport the debris to a landfill 14 miles away in Morris by IDOC and more than 40 trucks from IDOT and municipalities from around the region.