



Summer of storms keeps ComEd crews on the road in the suburbs

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The storms that rocked the suburbs this summer wreaked havoc on many lives, including Bill Schauff.

Beginning on June 4, the ComEd crew leader worked all but one day that month to restore downed transmission towers in Streator and then replace 28 downed poles after a storm hit Des Plaines. But he took off the day he really needed - for his daughter's wedding on June 19. "I got home just in time to go to the rehearsal dinner and the wedding, and I was back at work the next day," said Schauff, who lives near Dixon with his wife and five children.

For about 25 years, Schauff has gone where most of us never would - right where a major storm has left behind live electrical wires and damaged poles or towers. He's among the first on the scene to assess the damage and immediately start restoration work.

Schauff is among nearly 2,000 men and women, all members of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 15, who maintain the network or restore power for ComEd. They often take their lives into their hands just to get to sites immediately after ice storms or tornadoes. Then they work 16-hour shifts, with eight hours off for rest.

"We're used to having a few storms here and there, but this has been an exceptional summer," said Schauff. "When the month of June hit, it really hit with a vengeance."

Summer storms

ComEd has handled a huge increase in storm-related outages compared to last summer

Percent increase

June 1-Aug. 15, 2010 from the same period a year ago*

	2010	2009	Percent change
Storms	11	4	175%
Outages	8,750	1,950	348%
Affected customers	1,400,000	319,000	339%

* 2009 numbers are for June 1 through August 31

Source: ComEd

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The pay is good - time and a half overtime on top of a \$55,000 to \$85,000 salary - but the long periods away from home and family can be lonely and the work can be dangerous.

"Many of these workers can be away from their home and families for long periods of time," said Brian Loomis, assistant business manager for IBEW Local 15 and a ComEd repairman.

The Illinois Commerce Commission, which oversees ComEd and other utilities, and the Citizens Utility Board, a Chicago-based consumer watchdog, both said they receive consumer complaints about outages, especially this summer.

Still, it hasn't been as bad as the blackouts that plagued the Chicago region during the 1990s, said Jim Chilsen, a spokesman for CUB, which consistently battles ComEd regarding its rationale for rate hike requests.

"We have all the respect in the world for the people who go up those poles to restore power," Chilsen said. "But we do often differ with the people who run the company."

This summer, a dozen severe storms led to more than 8,700 mass outages in ComEd's territory.

Schauff lives in Harmon, 18 miles southwest of Dixon, but works 128 miles away in ComEd's Libertyville office. He's often dispatched anywhere around the state and sometimes the nation.

Called at a moment's notice, he grabs his climbing belt, hooks and tools, along with a bag of clothes.

"When a major storm hits, they call everybody. It doesn't matter where you live," said Schauff, 51.

When crew members arrive on site, they quickly start to plan the most efficient and safest way to restore a damaged area. They secure structures or remove poles from customers' trees or homes,

"The first thing we have to do is make the area safe," Schauff said. "We talk with the police, who block off the roads."

They often bring in big cranes to move poles, cut them into smaller pieces and remove them. Parts that can be recycled, are. Then, they install new poles and lines.

"We really need to be careful so someone doesn't get hurt," said Schauff. He said he hasn't been seriously injured on the job and has never seen anyone killed in his 25 years.

"There's a lot of preplanning that goes into this, so everyone knows what they need to do," Schauff said.

It took about nine days to restore power in Des Plaines after a storm in June crumpled the transmission system, closing Touhy Avenue and forcing some residents to evacuate their homes because live wires fell too close for safety. Des Plaines Mayor Martin Moylan was so grateful that he thanked the first responders, the residents and the ComEd crews "who have worked around the clock to restore operations as expeditiously as possible," Moylan said at the time.

Schauff's only thoughts during each restoration project is getting the job done.

"The system is more reliable now, but it's also more complicated," Schauff said. "So we're always learning on this job."