

EA R9: Inclement Weather

Abstract: Cornell University's delayed response to the winter storm that hit Ithaca and the surrounding region on February 6-7, 2020 demonstrated extreme disregard for the safety of its staff, students, and faculty. Due to the late closure of the campus, Cornell employees and students—many of whom rely on mass transit—were stranded on campus or on the road in dangerous conditions. The most vulnerable members of our community, in particular, were adversely affected, including those with accessibility issues, and staff who could not afford to miss work or who did not have the opportunity to work remotely.

The Employee Assembly calls on the university to make employee welfare a higher priority in inclement weather closing decisions. To this end, we ask that the university review and improve its inclement weather policy, decision-making criteria and communications protocols.

Sponsored by:

Carrie Sanzone, Vice Chair for Communications and Representative At-Large
Kristine Mahoney, Employee Welfare Committee Chair and College of Human Ecology Representative
Andrea Haenlin-Mott, Disability Representative At-Large
Brandon Fortenberry, Division of Student and Campus Life Representative
Jamie Duong, School of Hotel Administration Representative
Jessica E. Withers, Chair of the Elections Committee and Library and Museum Representative
Marcy Benda, Women's Representative At-Large
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Rigel Lochner, Health and Safety Representative At-Large

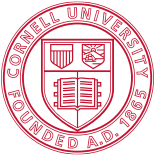
Reviewed by: Employee Welfare Committee, May 18, 2020

Whereas, according to the Division of Human Resources Workforce Report, 62% of Cornell University staff live outside Ithaca; 40% of Cornell University staff have a regular commute of 20 minutes or more.¹

Whereas, according to the TCAT Strategic Plan, over 70% of TCAT ridership is associated with the university.² Roughly 16-18% of staff use TCAT bus service to commute to work.

¹ Division of Human Resources Workforce Report (2018), https://apps.hr.cornell.edu/hr_professional_docs/for_employees/Workforcereport_FY2018.pdf

²TCAT Strategic Plan 2018 – 2030, https://www.tcatbus.com/content/uploads/2019/01/Strategic-Plan_2018-to-2030.pdf



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Whereas, through its Employee Commuter Alternative Program³, which includes unlimited TCAT Bus Access, Cornell encourages employees to help reduce the number of vehicles on campus by forgoing or relinquishing their parking pass in favor of riding the bus to work.

Whereas, Cornell University Policy 8.2⁴ prescribes the method for evaluation and communication of changes to operating status during and surrounding periods of inclement weather.

Whereas, Environmental Health and Safety is listed as the responsible office for Policy 8.2.

Whereas, according to the Cornell Inclement Weather FAQ⁵, the university assigns a Designated Weather Watcher (DWW) within the Office of Emergency Management who monitors potential severe or inclement weather and engages key campus personnel in the assessment of expected weather conditions and the ability to maintain campus in a safe and passable condition.

Whereas, the Cornell Inclement Weather FAQ states, “Snowfall rates greater than one inch per hour for at least three hours will usually exceed our ability to remove snow and maintain clear walkways, parking lots, and campus roads.”

Whereas, according to Cornell’s Accessibility website⁶, the Grounds Department uses Inclement Weather Plans to assist persons with disabilities that affect mobility who may experience difficulty getting to their worksite during inclement weather.

Whereas, as early as Feb. 2 the National Weather Service (NWS) issued a Winter Weather Advisory for Tompkins County, forecasting a ‘potent’ storm Thursday night into Friday morning.

Whereas, midday Feb. 6 the NWS upgraded this forecast to a Winter Storm Warning, the highest level of winter weather alert, for Tompkins County and the surrounding region from 10 p.m. through midnight on Friday Feb. 7.

Whereas, the NWS briefing as of Feb. 6 at 4:45 p.m. warned of heavy snow Friday morning with snowfall rates of 2+ inches per hour possible for a 2-4-hour period in Central NY, leading to dangerous travel conditions.

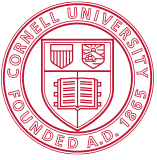
Whereas, the Office of Emergency Management at 8:32 p.m. reported internally on the National Weather service briefing. The report asserted, “Grounds is prepared for the snow,” but acknowledged that “during the heaviest snowfall there may be snow covered roads and walks at times.”

³ Employee Commuter Alternative Program, <https://fcs.cornell.edu/departments/transportation-delivery-services/parking/getting-around/bus-services/employee-commuter-alternative-program>

⁴ Cornell University Policy 8.2, Inclement Weather, https://www.dfa.cornell.edu/sites/default/files/policy/vol8_2.pdf

⁵ Inclement Weather Frequently Asked Questions, <https://emergency.cornell.edu/wxfaq/>

⁶ Campus Access in Inclement Weather, <http://accessibility.cornell.edu/campus/inclement-weather/>



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Whereas, the Tompkins County Sheriff issued a travel advisory early Friday morning. Although the advisory did not restrict travel, drivers were urged to “use caution while driving and avoid any unnecessary travel.” Sheriff’s offices around the region, including Broome, Tioga and Cortland, also issued travel advisories due to hazardous road conditions.

Whereas, both the Ithaca College emergency closing policy⁷ and the TC3 snow closing procedures specify the timing of operating status decisions, which take into account employee shift start times. The TC3 snow closing procedure also includes limited hours for dining service.

Whereas, Ithaca College announced at 12:10 a.m. Friday that their campus would be closed as of 7 a.m.; TC3 announced at 5:32 a.m. Friday that their campus would be closed.

Whereas, many Cornell staff were required to travel to campus to arrive before the campus eateries opened at 7:00 a.m. and before the first classes began at 8:00 a.m.

Whereas, TCAT (area transit provider) temporarily suspended all bus service as of 8:42 a.m. on Friday, citing unplowed roads. Service did not resume until 3 p.m.

Whereas, as of 10 a.m. on Friday, the CUinfo Alerts page, which provides information on operating status changes, had been viewed over 7,000 times in anticipation of a weather decision announcement.⁹

Whereas, no weather-related alerts were disseminated by Cornell until 10:02 a.m. Friday when the university abruptly announced classes were canceled as of 9:55 a.m. Staff, students and faculty, many of whom were already en route to work or class, were advised “to prioritize their safety” and “not to travel at this time,” yet the university remained open. At the time of the announcement, six inches of snow had already fallen.¹⁰

Whereas, Cornell announced it would be closing its Ithaca campus as of noon on Friday, nearly two hours after classes were canceled for the day. With numerous roads closed and bus service still suspended, employees were advised to “use caution” and “consider remaining on campus” until conditions improved; however, those with children attending the Cornell University Childcare Center were forced to travel to pick them up by 1 p.m. when the center itself closed.

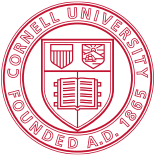
Whereas, the university amended its pay guidelines for the Ithaca and Geneva Campuses for Friday, February 7, 2020 due to the university closure. Non-exempt employees, including benefits eligible

⁷ Ithaca College Policy 2.9, Emergency Closing, https://www.ithaca.edu/policies/vol2/volume_2-209/

⁸ TC3 Snow Closing Procedure, <https://www.tompkinscortland.edu/college-info/snow-closing-procedure>

⁹ CUinfo Alerts, <https://cuinfo.cornell.edu/alerts/>. Web analytics attached.

¹⁰ Stamm, Kathryn. “With Snow Day Announced Midday, Confusion Rains Down on Cornell’s Campus.” Cornell Daily Sun, <https://cornellsun.com/2020/02/07/with-snow-day-announced-midday-confusion-rains-down-on-cornells-campus/>



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temporary employees, received regular rate of pay from the time they arrived on campus through the university closure and received premium pay from the time of the closure through the end of their regular shift regardless of whether they continued to work or left work. Exempt employees, including benefits eligible temporary employees, who reported to work received their regular pay on Feb. 7, and paid time off equal to half of their normal workday.

Be it therefore resolved, the Employee Assembly condemns the university's handling of the Ithaca campus closure on Feb. 7, which endangered the lives of its staff, students and faculty.

Be it further resolved, the Assembly acknowledges and appreciates the special amendment to the pay guidelines for the Ithaca and Geneva Campuses for the Feb. 7 closure.

Be it further resolved, that, in weighing weather-related operating status changes, Cornell must:

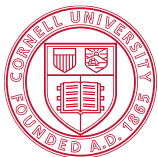
- ensure all staff, students, faculty and visitors, especially those with accessibility issues, can navigate campus safely when the university is open.
- consider travel conditions to and from campus, in addition to on-campus conditions, taking into account regional indicators such as county-wide winter storm warnings and travel advisories, status of bus transit, and widespread school closings.
- provide proactive communication to staff when a winter storm is being tracked.
- adhere to a schedule for operating status decisions, aligned with shift start times, to give commuters ample notice and help avoid unnecessary risks.
- to the extent possible, align with the operating status of the Cornell Child Care Center.

Be it further resolved, that Cornell will take steps to raise employee awareness of inclement weather protocols, including:

- familiarize employees with the various campus operating statuses
- publish more detailed decision-making criteria for greater transparency
- clarify what it means to be classified as "essential" in the context of campus operations during inclement weather or another emergency; and
- require supervisors to establish emergency work plans with their employees.

Be it further resolved, that Cornell will incorporate remote work options into its inclement weather policy and communications, giving particular consideration to whether travel to work should constitute "unnecessary travel" if an employee can perform their duties remotely when the university remains open during inclement weather.

Be it further resolved, that Cornell, recognizing that bus service is a critical part of campus operations, will strengthen its communication with TCAT (area transit provider) and coordinate transportation planning for scenarios in which the university operating status changes or area bus service is suspended due to inclement weather.



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Be it further resolved, that Cornell commits to providing room and board for any essential staff required to report to work in inclement weather, as well as for employees stranded on campus due to bus service interruption or dangerous road conditions, to allow for safe travel ahead of a storm or once it has cleared.

Be it further resolved, that Cornell consider implementing a weather and safety leave policy for all employees. Said policy would allow for the provision of leave to an employee or group of employees for time or service if the employee or group of employees is prevented from safely traveling to or performing work at their place of employment.

Be it finally resolved, the Department of Environmental Health and Safety and the Office of Emergency Management, in collaboration with campus partners, will conduct a review of current inclement weather policy and procedures to consider their impacts on employee welfare and make recommendations to improve decision-making criteria, communications, and policy guidance to staff and supervisors. The department will complete its review and provide a report to the Assembly before October 15, 2020.

Adopted by Vote of the Assembly (23-0), May 20, 2020

Respectfully Submitted,

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Kristine Mahoney, Employee Welfare Committee Chair and College of Human Ecology Representative
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