Power outages create frigid 'nightmare' for Keowee Key residents



CAITLIN HERRINGTON | THE JOURNAL

Keowee Fire Department Captain David Mansfield peers into an unexpected hole in the bathroom ceiling at the department. The frigid temperatures that left thousands without power in the Keowee Key area also led to minor flooding damage in several buildings.

BY JOSIE RABBITT
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SALEM — The recent polar vortex that has sent frigid weather throughout the country created a "nightmare" for Keowee Key residents and the Keowee Fire Department, according to Fire Chief Richie Caudill.

Keowee Key residents who are Duke Energy customers were literally left in the cold Monday and a majority of the day Tuesday.

According to the company's power outage map, the arctic front that settled

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"We would have been very prepared had the power not come back on," Caudill said. "The assistance has been good on all fronts. Yes, we've had some problems of course, and the fire department suffered some flooding, but like I said, in the grand scheme of things, this has been minor. It could have been way worse."

jrabbitt@upstatetoday.com | (864) 973-6681

NIGHTMARE: 'It could have been way worse'

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over Oconee County early Monday morning brought with it severe power outages that unplugged more than 2,500 Duke Energy customers.

Caudill said the fire department had dealt with "a volume of calls" concerning the power outage.

"We've been really working the public service part of our job since about 5 a.m. Monday," Caudill said. "But that's a huge part of our job, so it's not a problem, and we've had a lot of assistance with this. This power outage has actually been a small problem in the big scheme of things, and people have been very understanding about it."

After almost 24 hours of no power for many in the Lake Keowee area, Duke spokeswoman Catherine Butler said that cold weather and high demand for assistance were the causes for a slow turnaround.

"We are working specifically on this outage and we know that it is affecting quite a few people," Butler said. "We're doing our absolute best to get that on as soon as possible. Our folks have been trying to bring that power back online for them, but due to the cold weather and the high demand we have been experiencing some issues related to the cold weather and the high demand."

At around 5 p.m. Tuesday, more than 2,000 people without power finally saw the light.

"Keowee Key is a retirement community," Caudill said. "People don't realize, but there are a lot of things you can not do without power, and we had a bunch of elderly call about cars being stuck in their garages because the automatic doors couldn't open. People couldn't get in their cars to drive to the shelter for temporary heating. People don't think about the simple things that power really does affect in our lives every day."

According to Caudill, the Tuesday power restoration was "a relief to the nightmare" that hit his department at the start of the first full week of the new year.

"If the power hadn't turned back on, we had a contingency plan," Caudill said. "Without power, you can't send emergency shelter messages to folks. They'd have had no TV to watch it from or a radio to listen to. We were going to have to go door to door in the dropping temperatures and alert folks."

Though the power had been mostly restored to the homes of Keowee Key at press time Tuesday, with less than 150 homes still in need of power, the outage left damage to the fire department, Keowee Key activity center and the Wine Emporium — as well as a few homes in the area — mostly as a result of burst pipes and sprinkler systems.

Caudill said that while the fire department received 17 calls over the past two days concerning the power outage, just two were house fires caused by wood stoves.

"We contained the fires with no injuries," Caudill said, "and we didn't do it alone. We had great support and response from numerous stations, including Ebenezer, Shiloh, Station 21 and Keowee. I have had (Oconee County Fire Chief) Charlie King calling me all day (Tuesday) concerned and offering help."

Caudill said he was confident in the "preparedness of the fire department and supporters of the surrounding towns" through the power outage.