



Hurricane Isaac power restoration 'getting better each day,' Entergy official says

By Bruce Nolan, The Times-Picayune
August 31, 2012 at 7:25 PM

At mid-afternoon Friday, John Kegel and his four-man utility crew from Union, Ill., their big trucks blocking a lane of traffic on South Claiborne Avenue, tamped the ground into place around a new 55-foot utility pole they had just erected to carry power into Central City.

The new pole supported a critical feeder line running along South Claiborne, past the Advance Auto Parts store that stood open, dark, and hot and nearly empty. And its installation -- the sixth and last new pole running from Third Street up toward Toledano Avenue -- would bring thousands of households on both sides of Claiborne a little closer to electrification after three days without power because of Hurricane Isaac, said Philip Allison, a spokesman for Entergy New Orleans.

Kegel's crew, from Intren, an electrical contractor based 60 miles northwest of Chicago, is one of an estimated 12,000 workers from Entergy and 24 states that have converged on metropolitan New Orleans to begin restoring power to more than 300,000 still blacked-out households.

"It's getting better each day," Dennis Dawsey, Entergy's vice president of transmission and distribution operations in Louisiana, said Friday. "We've had some challenges with this storm, in terms of the length of time it lingered and remained, heavy rains and winds, which didn't allow us to get started with the restoration process as soon as some of other storms."

Late Friday afternoon, the metro New Orleans area, including Jefferson and Orleans, as well as St. Bernard, St. Charles, St. John the Baptist and St. Tammany parishes, accounted for about two-thirds of the utility's power outages across the state.

Dawsey said he expects to have estimates of how long it will take to restore power to each parish sometime this weekend, but generally the company expects power will be restored to at least 90 percent of its Louisiana customers by "the end of next week."

Kegel said his crew began rolling for New Orleans even before Isaac arrived. They reached Baton Rouge and waited while Isaac battered New Orleans with estimated 80 mph winds. They pushed into town as the storm cleared the city.

Some out-of-state crews, like Kegel's, are put up in local hotels, their trucks parked in a staging area at the site of the former Carrollton Shopping Center.

But they don't have much down time.

According to Allison, crews are up at 6:30 a.m., briefed on the day's assignments and on their way by about 7:30 a.m. for a shift that can last 16 hours.

Out-of-state crews like Kegel's are accompanied by Entergy liaisons -- in Kegel's case, Ryan Price, from LaPlace, who has been steadily at work in New Orleans while his wife and two daughters cope with the loss of both power and water at home.

Utility crews work after dark and in the rain, Price said. They stop only when lightning is in the area and when winds are above 30 mph.

Price and others describe the electrical distribution grid in terms of the human circulatory system, branching from a central source into ever thinner channels.

Power flows from a central generating station through massive transmission lines to regional substations.

Feeder lines, such as the one on South Claiborne, carry power out of substations. "A feeder can run for miles," said Allison.

At the capillary level, "laterals" branch off feeders, and laterals in turn charge the lines that bring power to individual homes and businesses.

The good news: Isaac has left the distribution system largely intact down to the level of substations, said Allison.

"All of our substations are hot," he said.

But Allison and Price concurred: Isaac has wreaked havoc with feeders and the distribution system downstream, toppling poles, dropping trees on lines and doing other finely textured damage.

That's where most of the work is concentrated, they said.

At the capillary level, "this storm was worse than Gustav" in 2008, said Price. "It took so long for this storm to go through, the system just took a real beating."

"Right now we're concentrating on getting all the feeders up," Allison said.

So it happened that Kegel's crew parked their two big boom trucks in the far right-hand land of South Claiborne, extended hydraulic outriggers for bracing and began changing out the ruined pole in front of the auto-parts store.

One of the two trucks was specially fitted for hoisting the old and new poles; working the hydraulic boom Mike Maxy lifted the new pole at a single attachment point, guided it over a new seven-a-half-foot hole and let it slide into position.

Another crew member overhead attached the de-energized lines to a crossbrace.

But if some of the equipment is specialized, the utility crews themselves are generalists, able to fix a whole spectrum of disrepair, Allison said.

As Kegel's crew finished tamping in their new pole, Price said they'd probably go to work next repairing lateral feeds in the neighborhood.

In fact, several utility trucks were parked around the corner on Third Street, already at work on those lines.

Allison and Price said neighborhoods on both side of Claiborne were getting close to lighting up again.

In the last few days, Allison and Entergy New Orleans CEO Charles Rice have frequently repeated the utility's priorities for restoring power.

Critical institutions like hospitals, nursing homes, police and fire stations get early attention, they said.

After that, it's a matter of getting the most bang for every hour's work.

"If you can put four crews on a job that brings back 10,000 customers, as opposed to four crews bringing in 1,000, our choice is the 10,000," said Allison, who said he hasn't checked the status of his Broadmoor house since before the storm.

"I assume it's out; I don't know," he said.