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NEWS

Leader works to stem tide of suffering Supervisor with flooded home puts town residents' plight first

By [Liz Hacken](#)*Press & Sun-Bulletin*

CONKLIN -- Debra Preston calls the town's residents "my people."

Preston and her people are all facing the same unbearable circumstances: losing their homes to Mother Nature and trying to find the strength and money to rebuild their lives. Flooding wrecked Preston's home, but her priority has been making sure the town's almost 6,000 people are taken care of.

Through it all, Preston, 51, has kept her composure, but it has been a battle. Most of her time is spent helping flood-stricken residents navigate the sea of paperwork and bureaucracy that they must go through to get federal and state money to rebuild and lobbying officials to get Conklin the help it desperately needs.

The 3 1/2-year supervisor's seemingly unending phone pleas to federal, state and local officials for help are usually punctuated by a simple question: "What are you going to do for my people?"

"I made decisions I never thought I'd have to make," Preston said. "I thought the whole world was on my shoulders."

Since the flood, Preston's days usually include at least one visit to the disaster assistance center set up at Susquehanna Valley High School to check on how many of her people have registered for FEMA assistance and talk to people who are looking for help. All the while, she's hearing their stories, which are not unlike her own.



Photos by REBECCA TOWNS / Press & Sun-Bulletin

Town of Conklin Supervisor Debra Preston, right, embraces Chenango Bridge resident Joyce Rhodes as she attends a community lunch Thursday at the Conklin Presbyterian Church. Rhodes attended with her friend and flood evacuee John Cernek of Conklin, left.

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Until Sunday, Preston's home base was a cot set up at the town hall. She wasn't even able to get back to her home on Conklin Road until a week after the flooding.

Thursday was the first night she'd be spending at her home, albeit she'll be sleeping in a trailer on her lawn. Now her husband will be able to start working on cleaning out the house and she can start putting in more hours at her private-sector job in sales for Burr Truck and Trailer Sales in Vestal.

"I can sleep at least in a trailer in my yard at least," she said. "We're not talking the Taj Mahal, but at least it's something."

Her goal for her people on Thursday was convincing FEMA to send trailers for Conklin residents to live in while rebuilding their homes. It would allow them, like her, to start working on their homes and get them ready to move back in.

She bent everyone's ear who would listen: a representative from Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton's office, Federal Emergency Management Agency staff at Susquehanna Valley High School and even several residents, including Shirley Cox of Corbettsville during a quick lunch break at the Conklin Presbyterian Church.

But she kept hearing the same response -- that trailers from FEMA are seen as a last resort. It seems like a simple solution, she said, but she realizes that the stress of the flood is taking a toll and it may be tougher than she thinks to get the trailers to Conklin.

"I haven't had much sleep in the past two weeks," she joked with a representative from Clinton's office. "Maybe I'm not making sense."

There have been some bright spots in the past few weeks, including on Thursday when she found out senior citizens displaced by the floods would have priority for the 24 apartments in a new housing complex on Conklin Road next to the post office.

Previously, a lottery system had been in place to select residents for the complex, said Amherst-based developer Bruce L. Levine who is leading the project. Those interested have until Aug. 1 to submit their applications, available at Conklin Town Hall.

"It was untouched by the flood and only delayed construction by a week," Levine told Preston before a Thursday afternoon tour of the building, which is scheduled to open Nov. 1.

But the lives of thousands of people in Conklin were touched by the floodwaters. They now face the complex dilemma of whether to rebuild or move elsewhere to start anew.



Debra Preston returns a phone call Thursday to the office of U.S. Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton. Preston has been lobbying for FEMA trailers for Town of Conklin residents who are trying to rebuild.

Preston hears these stories on a daily basis and keeps her composure while listening; she knows she owes it to them.

"Sometimes, I lose it," she said, "but not in front of the people."

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