

# North Georgia News

Hometown newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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## Winter Storm Benji dumps 11-plus inches of snow in county

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

Winter Storm Benji strengthened with storm strength the morning of Friday, Dec. 8, outperforming early snow estimates by at least 10 inches as it continued to drop snow through early Saturday morning.

The Union County Road Department worked overtime during the storm, clearing hundreds of trees out of roadways, and making roads safer with plowing and winter road treatments.

Union County's first responders, including the fire department, EMS personnel, law enforcement and 911 dispatch, stayed busy throughout the weekend, coordinating their efforts

to motor vehicle accidents and numerous medical calls.

Crews from the Blue Ridge Mountain EMC worked around the clock to restore power during a storm that brought upwards of a foot of snow in many places.

The wet and heavy nature of the snow toppled trees and limbs left and right, and snow clung greedily to power lines. When the snow finally started to melt on Saturday, lines would snap up and down into each other, causing new or repeat outages.

"Despite the adversity of putting lines back on that end up going back off the next day, our line personnel and operations personnel have kept a very positive, enthusiastic attitude," said EMC General

Manager Jeremy Nelms, noting that it takes time to respond to so many outages. "They're really out there working hard for the members."

Compared to Hurricane Irma, which resulted in more than 60 broken power poles throughout the EMC, Winter Storm Benji caused only six broken poles.

And though Benji seems to have been less destructive than Irma, it affected a greater area than the September tropical storm.

At its peak, the winter storm caused power outages to more than 18,000 meters and tripped more than 700 protective devices throughout the five-county area of the Blue Ridge Mountain EMC,

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A Blue Ridge Mountain EMC line worker getting power back on for residents. Winter Storm Benji left thousands without power over the weekend. Photo/BRMEMC Facebook

## UCSO Lt. James recovering from crash-related injuries

By Charles Duncan  
North Georgia News  
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Union County Sheriff's Lt. Leon James was listed in serious condition at Northeast Georgia Medical Center in Gainesville, following an accident on Georgia 515 en route to Hiwassee, authorities said.

Though many details were unavailable at press time, the accident occurred Sunday morning near Bowling Gap, Union County Sheriff's Lt. Daren Osborn said, adding that road conditions were apparently dry at the time of the accident.

"I don't have all the details of the accident," Lt. Osborn said. "I know that the accident occurred right there at Bowling Gap, the (Ford F-150) left the roadway and flipped three or four times.

"He was in his personal vehicle," Lt. Osborn said.



UCSO Lt. Leon James

"He was flown to Gainesville (Northeast Georgia Medical Center), and of course, he is in serious condition. He has broken ribs and other injuries.

"His injuries are not life threatening, and he should make it," Lt. Osborn said. "However, it's going to be a long road to

recovery." Union County Sheriff Mack Mason said Lt. James had an angel looking over his shoulder.

"If you look at that truck and realize that he came out of the wreck alive, you'd say it was a miracle," Sheriff Mason said. "That truck was torn to pieces."

Lt. James is the head of security for the Sheriff's Office at the Union County Courthouse.

Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris reached out on social media Sunday afternoon, asking for prayer for Lt. James.

"Please say a prayer for Leon," Commissioner Paris wrote on Facebook. "He is a great guy who we all have the utmost respect and admiration for."

Additional details about the crash and Lt. James' condition were unavailable at press time.

## Preparedness is key for safety in emergency weather events

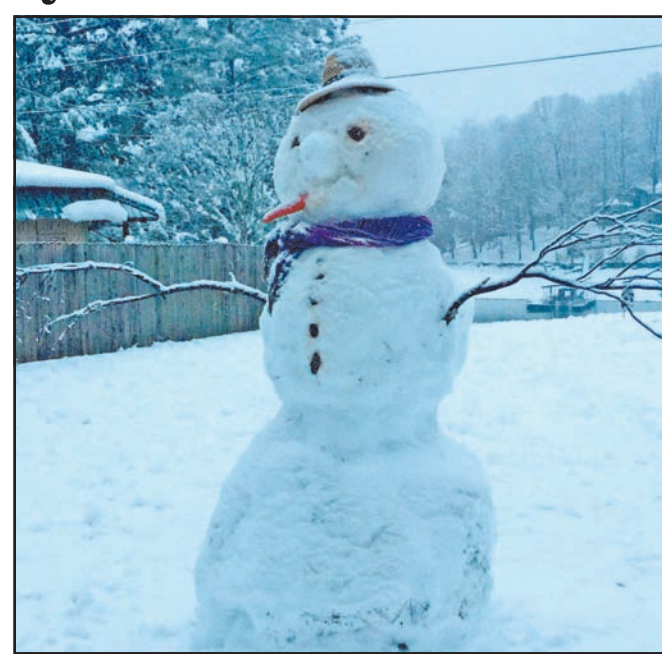
By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

With little notice, Winter Storm Benji swept through the North Georgia mountains on Friday, Dec. 8, dropping nearly a foot of snow and leaving thousands without power for 48 hours or more.

All first responders, including the employees of the Blue Ridge Mountain EMC, worked hard to make sure people remained safe during the storm.

Despite the best efforts of first responders – which are always appreciated – the fact of the matter remains: many people rely too heavily on the public sector during big weather events.

Depending on the size of the storm and the extent of



For all its downsides, the snow dropped by Benji was perfect for building snowmen, like this 8-footer on Lake Nottely. Photo/Debbie Sterner

## Christmas Program brings joy to foster kids during holiday

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

One of the best things about Christmas morning is spending time with family, a luxury that foster children don't have.

Thankfully, the Towns & Union Foster Children's Enrichment Program has been hard at work for 18 years gathering donations made by giving individuals to provide rewarding and positive Christmas experiences for

children who are currently caught in the legal system.

The program, a nonprofit entity, is carried out by former and current CASA volunteers – that's Court Appointed Special Advocates for children – and their efforts are possible thanks to donations and involvement by generous residents of Towns and Union counties.

Because the identities of children in foster care are kept secret for their own protection, people who decide to sponsor a foster child never know the name of the kid they are

helping.

On the other hand, the child gets to fill out their very own wish list to be used by a sponsor for shopping, so it's almost as if each sponsor is Santa Claus for a special child in need.

The process begins a couple of months before Christmas, as program co-founder Pat Elliott begins rounding up a master list of children who will benefit from the yearly "Foster Children's Christmas Program."

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Volunteers with the "Foster Children's Christmas Program," during the 2016 Christmas season. Photo/Shawn Jarrard

## Blairsville Cruiser donations making Christmas bright for kids



Members of the Blairsville Cruisers with Blairsville Police Chief Johnny Carroll. Photo/Shawn Jarrard

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

For another year running, the Blairsville Cruisers have teamed up with the Union

County Sheriff's Office and the Blairsville Police Department to help families put presents under Christmas trees.

Now in their 10th year as an organization, the

Cruisers spend a good part of the year raising money for local charitable efforts with their ever-popular annual car raffle, plus their Cruise-In sponsors and food sales.



The Blairsville Cruisers dropping off a donation at the Union County Sheriff's Office. Photo/Shawn Jarrard

When all is said and done, the Blairsville Cruisers is one of those nonprofits that makes an entire community a better place to live.

Together, Cruisers raise

thousands of dollars each year for a variety of causes, including for kids' Christmases, to go to the Union County Food Bank, to provide scholarships for local graduates, and even to

help individual families from time to time to buy food or cover a fuel bill during the cold winter months.

See in their perpetual

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