

## **JEA linemen will put in 16-hour shifts and live out of hotels while restoring power**

<https://www.jacksonville.com/story/weather/hurricane/2024/10/09/jea-linemen-will-handle-back-to-back-storm-damage/75572840007/>

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Jacksonville Florida Times-Union

10/9/24

For the [second time in two weeks](#), JEA linemen will be living out of their suitcases while putting in 16-hour shifts after a major storm hurtles through the Jacksonville area.

It's what linemen have come to expect this time of year during hurricane season when they work long hours together while guarding against mistakes in a job where even small errors can have dangerous consequences.

"This time of year, we spend more time with the guys here at work than we do with our families at home," said Butch Hartman, who has been a JEA lineman for 15 years.

That's literally the case during storm responses such as for Hurricane Helene and [now for Hurricane Milton](#). JEA books hotel rooms for linemen so they won't be stuck in their homes because of road or bridge closures. The hotels are located near the JEA service centers on each side of Jacksonville so that means line workers aren't eating into their rest time by commuting long distances to their homes.

"You get right back ready to roll," Hartman said.

Franklee Taylor, who has been a JEA lineman for 15 years, said when crews are in the field, linemen watch out for each other and stand ready to step in if someone appears close to the limit physically or mentally. He said while working days on end in long shifts, there's no room for a lapse in concentration at any time.

"You only get one chance to mess up and it's unforgiving," Taylor said.

He said if he sees a fellow linemen is tired or vice versa, each will step in and help each other get back on track for the detailed work they're doing.

"We believe in each other as we work," he said. "It keeps morale up and it strengthens the brotherhood of what we do."

When Helene hit Florida earlier this month and sent tropical storm force winds through the Jacksonville area, the peak for [power failures saw 140,000 JEA customers](#) without electricity.

Milton [won't be a direct hit on Jacksonville](#), either, but JEA is expecting widespread power failures. The saturated ground is a recipe for strong wind to push over big trees and knock limbs onto power lines.

JEA [started the week in the hole](#) on how many contract crews it could bring to Jacksonville and work side by side with the utility's own line workers. On Monday, JEA had lined up 20 contract crews compared to 54 of those crews during Helene.

But as JEA hit the phones to find crews that could come to Jacksonville from other parts of the country, the number rose to 59 contract crews to help linemen.

"We started this process with a big deficit because so many line crews are spread out in other areas of Florida, in North Carolina and South Carolina and places that were hard hit by the previous storm," Mayor Donna Deegan said Wednesday.

With more help on board, JEA linemen spent Wednesday doing their usual work and also finalizing preparations at the utility's service yards and at their own homes.

Virgil Harris, who has been a JEA lineman for 20 years, said he always keeps a bag packed with essential items for when he'll be staying at hotels while working on power restoration. He packs seven days worth of items when he goes out of Jacksonville to help other utilities and five days of supplies when the mission is within JEA's service territory.

"After you've been through several storms, you kind of tune yourself for this time of season," he said. "I'll have that stuff ready to go."

Among JEA linemen who have worked 100 or more storms of varying impact, Harris can say he once spent 32 straight days away from Jacksonville when he helped restore power after Hurricane Sandy hit the area of New Jersey and New York in 2012.

This week, he and other linemen will work even as weather conditions deteriorate upon Milton's arrival on the west side of Florida. But when gusts exceed 30 mph, line workers come in from the field and hunker down like other residents until the winds die down enough to safely work in the elevated bucket trucks.

Then it becomes a round-the clock operation. The day shift for linemen is from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. and the night shift is from 4 p.m. to 8 a.m.

Taylor said he never wants to see any resident suffer bodily harm or property damage because of a storm. But once the storm has happened, the period of power restoration is a way to put training and experience from other storms into action.

"It tests your skill-set," Taylor said. "When you're working on a storm, you see the mixture of different things that you normally don't see on a day-to-day basis. So you might get a pole and it's completely demolished. Now you've got to build it completely from scratch."

Linemen sometimes are on the frontlines of emotions from frustrated customers who have been waiting for their lights to come back on. They also see the hospitality of JEA customers and hear their cheers after power is restored.

"The camaraderie of the crew definitely keeps you going, and then the support of the community," Hartman said. "People who just went through everything and don't have power are offering water, snacks and 'Can we help y'all?' That keeps you going."