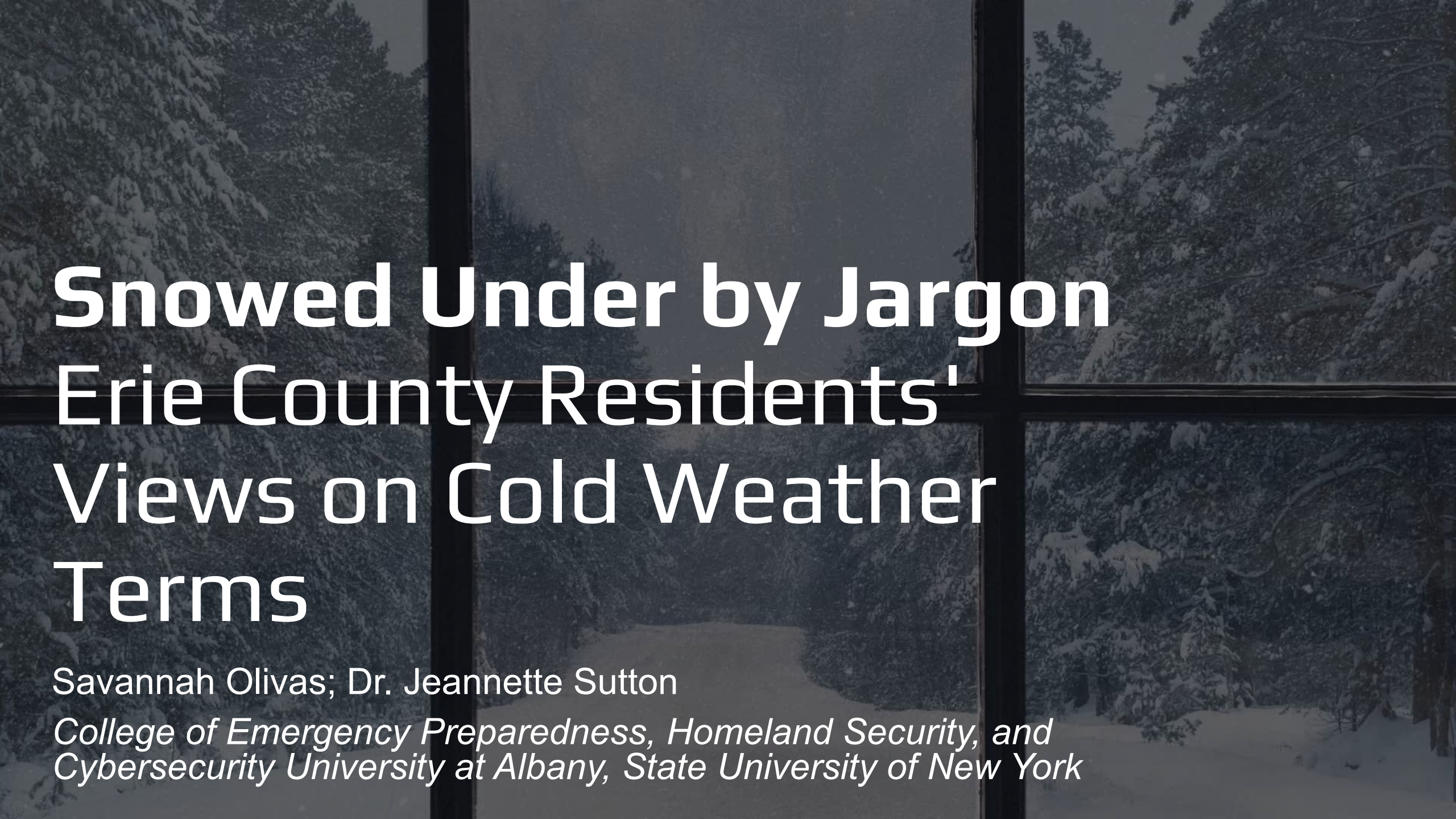
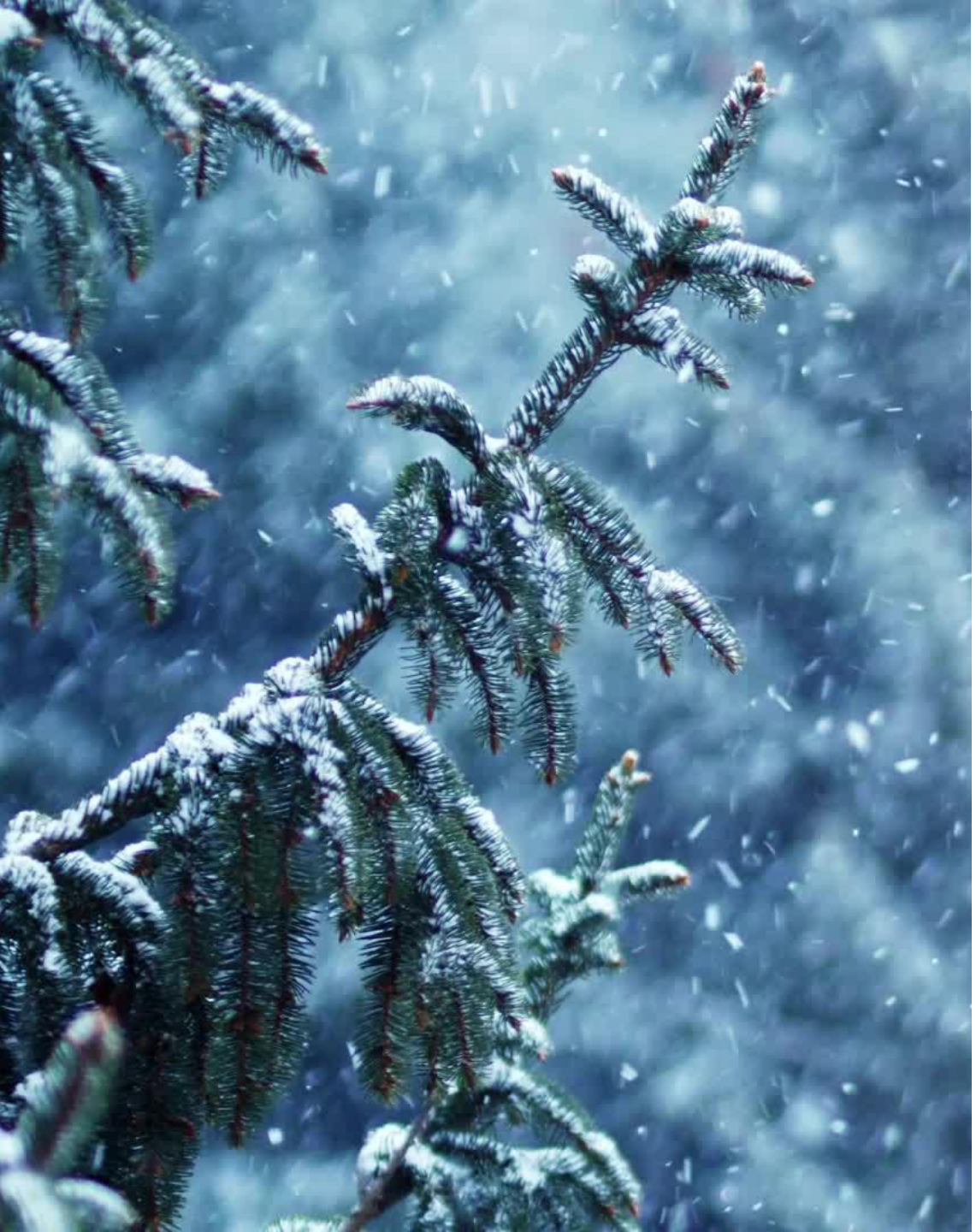


Snowed Under by Jargon Erie County Residents' Views on Cold Weather Terms

Savannah Olivas; Dr. Jeannette Sutton

College of Emergency Preparedness, Homeland Security, and Cybersecurity University at Albany, State University of New York



Purpose

- There are all sorts of terms for winter weather, *but do people understand them when we talk about them?*

- What do people understand about winter weather terminology? How do they interpret it?
- Are there differences between lifelong residents and newcomers in an area accustomed to winter weather?

Methods

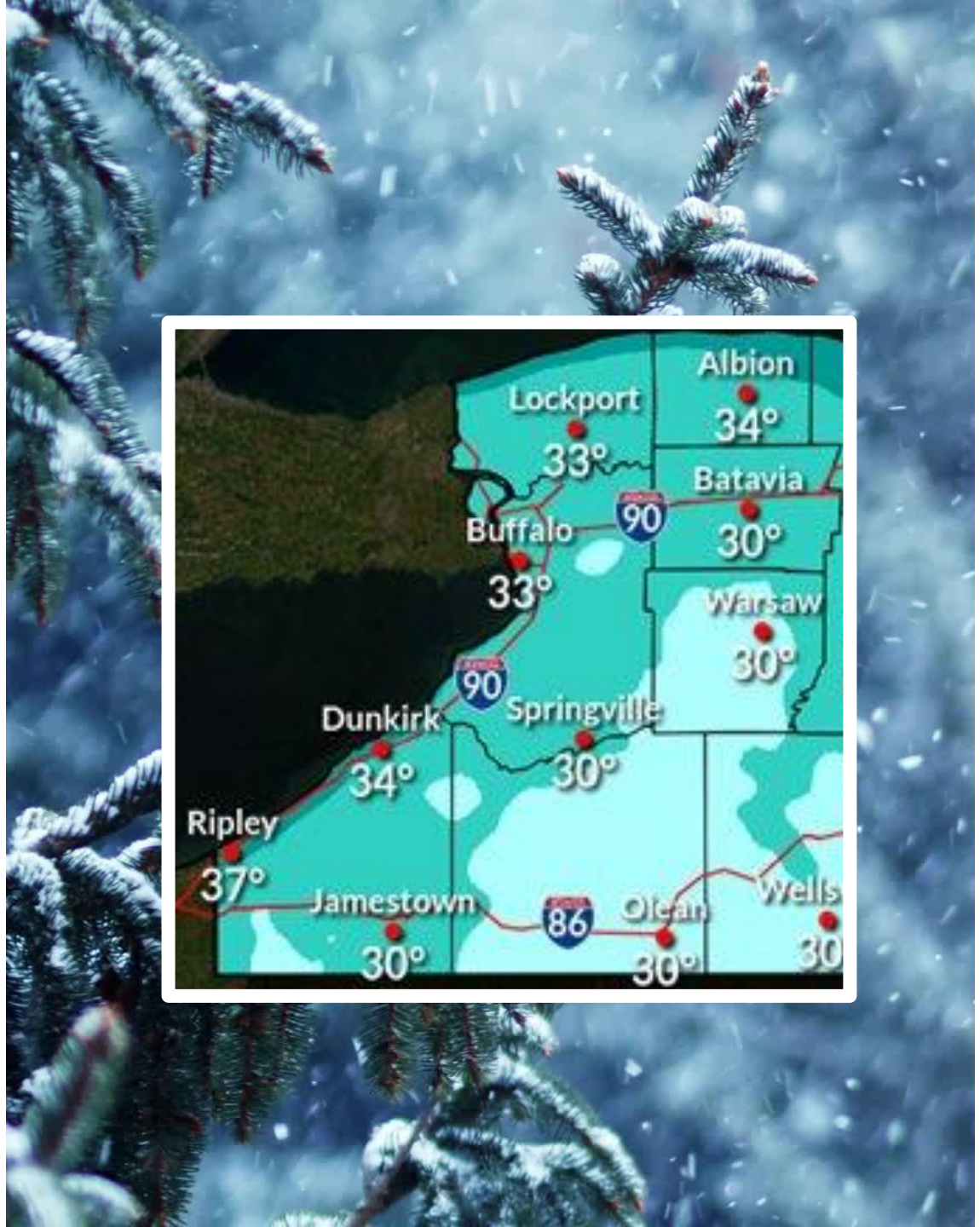
Recruited through Facebook.

Online Focus Groups

- 35 participants
- Some focus groups, some one-on-one interviews

Residents of Erie County

- **Native** – those born and raised in Erie County
- **Non-native** - those who moved to Erie County within the last ten years



Focus Group Questions

We crafted questions off the language and terms from tweets during the Buffalo Blizzard from 2022

[Term]

- What do you think about this term?
- What stands out to you?
- Is there anything confusing or difficult about this?

Today, we'll go over four terms: Lake effect snow, Winter Weather Advisory & Warning, Cold Weather Advisory & Warning and Wind Chill

RESULTS

Lake effect snow, Winter Weather Advisory & Warning, Cold Weather Advisory & Warning and Wind Chill

Lake Effect Snow

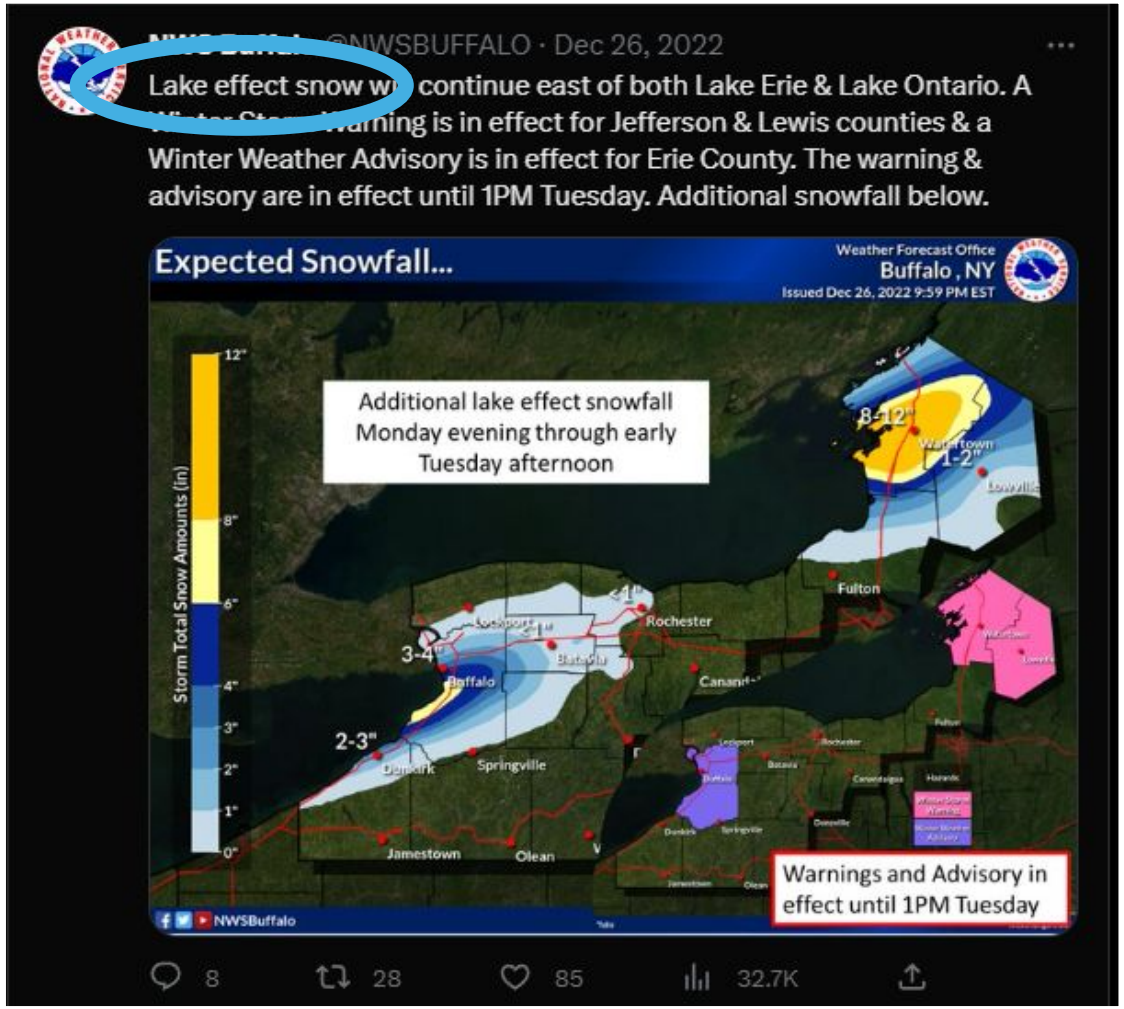
Cold air flows over a warm body of water and leads to narrow but very intense bands of precipitation from the orographic lifting.

Unpredictable, deceiving

- Some render it more telling than a warning
- Some render it meaningless to react to

Much more familiar to people native to Erie County

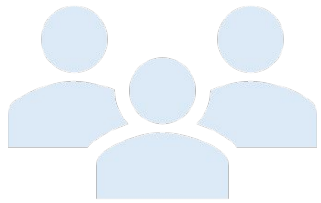
- Relies on local knowledge
- Newcomers hear it used often, but find it confusing
- Significance learned over time



"**I listen to this *more*** than advisories and watches.“

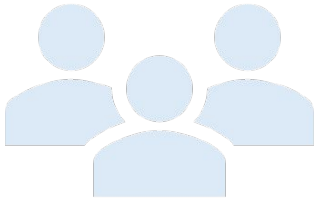
“Less than six inches is nothing; you'll still go to the movies, but **when you hear lake-effect, it's a whole different animal."**

Long-term Residents



Recent Resident

“I don't know if I've ever had the assumption that it's not lake-effect. **I always assume all snow is lake-effect snow.”**



Long-term Residents

Recent Resident

Winter Storm Warning

Associated with ice, snow, sleet and wind criteria.

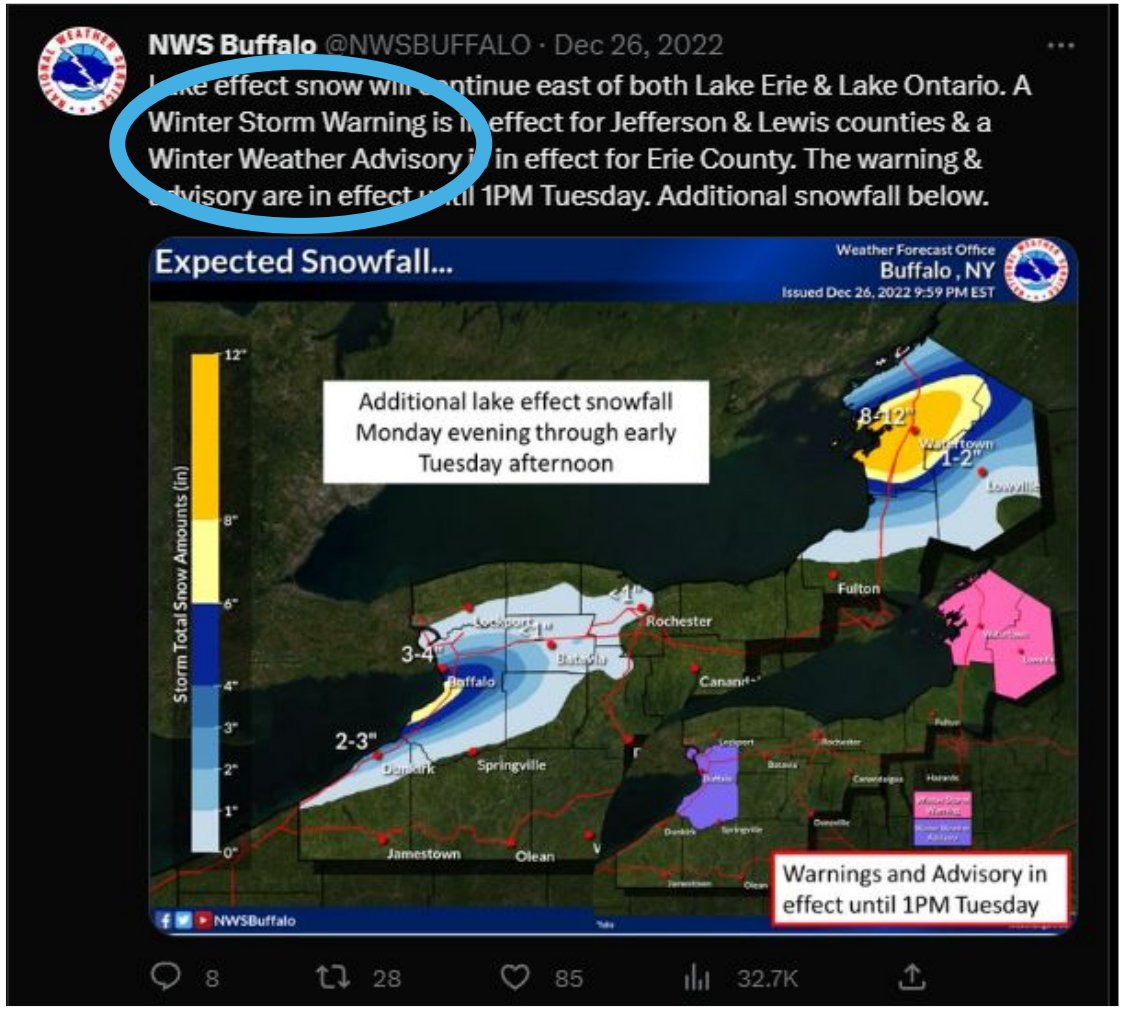
Considered **urgent, severe and dangerous**

- Rarely mentioned the exact meteorological phenomena involved with winter storms

Nearly all feel prompted to **prepare the essentials**

People want to be told precisely what to do.

- Desensitized from constant or unclear messaging.
- *BUT* also noted that warnings they previously ignored led to regret



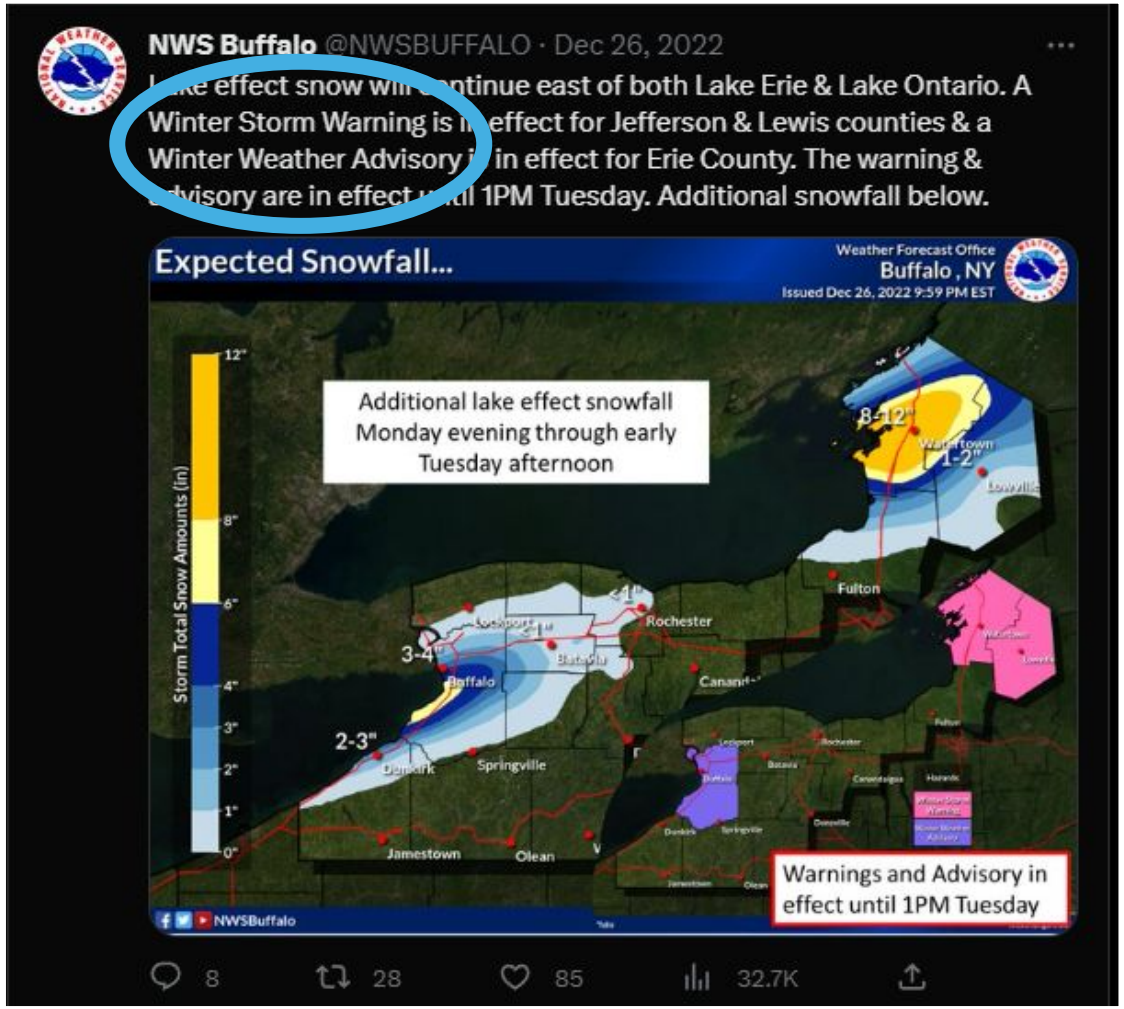
Warning vs. Advisory

Difference between an “advisory” and a “warning” sparked disagreement.

- Some did not see a difference
- Others did and viewed advisories as less severe than warnings.

Newer residents to Erie County were more likely to **reverse the definitions of advisories and warnings.**

- “Advisories are more severe than warnings”



Describing Cold Cold Weather Products

Formerly **Wind Chill Warning** Products

No clear understanding on differences between this advisory and warning

- *No practical difference* when it comes to cold temperatures.

Extreme had meaning, regardless of whether people could define advisory

- But “everyone has different thresholds for extreme”.

Describing Cold "Values"

As it's no longer called **Wind Chill Warning** products, language will need to be clearer.

Both locals and new residents prefer wind chill values as a descriptor for cold

- Most are familiar and understand that it's **feels-like temperature**.

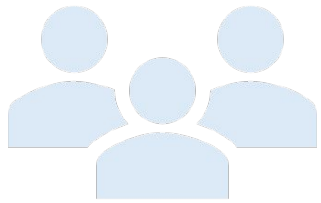
Vague words like values should be specified

- Are temperature values wind chill or actual temperature?

"**If it said wind chill, it would change my view***, but I would remove [the word] values altogether."

*It would be a useful graphic for them

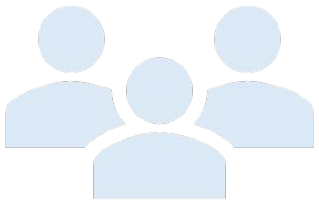
Long-term Residents



Recent Resident

“I don't think [values] is a very good word. **If it said wind chill, it would change my view of the graphic and the term*.”**

*It would be a useful graphic for them



Long-term Residents

Recent Resident

Recommendations from Focus Groups

Message clarity: Most people preferred clear instructions.

- *“Don't even worry about calling it a ban or advisory; just tell them exactly what to do so they don't get stuck […]”*

Language considerations for newcomers

- *Simplicity in language:* accessible vocabulary everyone can understand.
- Non-technical: “It wouldn't hurt to have a guide.”

Contact Information

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