

Picking Up the Pieces

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by Thomas Neve

The day after Hurricane Sandy, my staff and I brainstormed and came up with a plan to help people affected by the storm. Luckily, Reaching-Out Community Services (RCS) is far enough from the shore line that we weren't impacted by the severity of Sandy and were able to respond immediately. But many other communities around us weren't as fortunate. We had never experienced such a level of devastation this close to home, so we were winging it. First, we assisted Coney Island's Councilman Dominick Recchia, who had set up a relief site, by providing him with a truckload of food and water from our pantry stock.

Then we turned to social media. It was the perfect tool to put the rest of our plan into action. We spread the word on Facebook and Twitter that we were setting up two tents on the corner of Neptune Avenue and West 33rd Street as a hurricane relief site, and we needed volunteers to prepare hot meals and bring water and supplies for distribution.

What I saw the next morning when I arrived at the site brought tears to my eyes. There were dozens of cars with people unloading sandwiches, soup, hot trays of ziti and baked beans, fruit, water and much more. It was a feast. All in all, we mobilized more than 200 volunteers who helped us distribute hot meals and supplies from the tents for two days. And they've been helping us every since.

We then secured a storage unit outside our facility to create a hurricane relief drop-off center, and we've also secured a space, with help from Community Board 11, where we store additional supplies. A large portion of the food we've received has come from Food Bank For New York City, which sent trucks and trailers full of products. The RCS staff and hundreds of volunteers loaded their own vehicles with food and delivered them to disaster sites in nearby areas. It was a convoy of cars, filled with people determined to help their neighbors in need.

This outreach is still in effect and will continue as long as it's needed. With Food Bank's help we are able to distribute goods to our closest neighbors in Coney Island and Brighton Beach, and also help people in Red Hook, Gerritsen Beach, Staten Island and the Rockaways.

We have visited some of the most harshly impacted areas. The residents had no electricity, water or heat; their personal possessions were destroyed; and some even lost their homes due to severe damage. We have witnessed their sadness and sense of futility, but through it all they continue to display a heartfelt gratitude about the supplies they receive from us, and a spirit of resilience and strength that I know will see them through the difficult months ahead.

Thomas Neve is the Executive Director of Reaching-Out Community Services in Brooklyn, a member of the Food Bank For New York City network.