Hurricane Irene: A Test of Emergency Preparedness

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By Lydia Smith

As the leading hunger relief organization in New York City, the Food Bank plays a vital role in responding to natural disasters that affect the five boroughs. So, when news of Hurricane Irene came on a Friday afternoon, the Food Bank jumped into action.

Through our most valuable resource – a citywide network of approximately 1,000 food assistance programs – the Food Bank is positioned to bring assistance to our city wherever it is needed.

To maximize the effectiveness of our network and operations, the Food Bank maintains partnerships with the NYC Office of Emergency Management (OEM), the American Red Cross (ARC) and Volunteer Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD) for both New York State and City. Further, because the Food Bank is the contracted provider of food from the federal, state and city emergency food programs, we are prepared to respond to calls from the agencies in Washington, Albany and City Hall that manage those programs.

With these systems and relationships in play, the Food Bank quickly established plans to respond to Hurricane Irene come hell or high water, literally.

The Food Bank's executive team immediately moved to ensure business continuity by establishing contact with our partners and setting up transportation and communication plans for key staff. Within the hour, our warehouse team had positioned our stock of water to be ready for immediate distribution, ensured the availability of manually operated equipment and set up schedules to monitor operation of our cooler and freezer. Meanwhile, the Food Bank's Agency Relations team worked with OEM to map network programs by zone as well as identify those near evacuation sites.

While the widespread flooding that was feared did not occur, many low-income neighborhoods did experience prolonged power outages. For New Yorkers who struggle just to afford food, food spoiling due to lack of refrigeration can be a serious setback.

When Monday, August 29 arrived, the Food Bank was fully operational and able to deliver scheduled orders. Further, our Benefits Access team has led an effort to assist food stamp recipients in applying for replacement of food purchased with their benefits that was lost due to the storm. Working in partnership with the NYC Human Resources Administration and through outreach to areas that experienced flooding and loss of power, the Food Bank is focusing our energies on reaching New Yorkers who lost needed food.

After that very long weekend of preparation and anticipation, I am proud of what our organization is capable of – and am happy to tell you that the Food Bank will always remain ready.

As Director of Operations, Lydia Smith helps to manage business continuity policy and represents the Food Bank on the board of the New York City VOAD.