

As Congress dawdles, Northeast continues hurricane recovery

Because it smacked into the most densely populated coastal area in the country, Hurricane Sandy may prove to be one of the most expensive and damaging storms in United States history. Full recovery from the storm, which hit the New York and New Jersey area Oct. 30, will take years and cost billions of dollars.

And the sad truth is that some people's lives will never be the same. Some homes won't be rebuilt. Some displaced residents of New York, New Jersey and the other states affected will never return to their old towns or neighborhoods. Those who lost loved ones will never get them back.

To begin the long-term recovery process, President Barack Obama requested from Congress in early December \$60 billion in aid for areas affected by the storm. The aid would go to the Federal Emergency Management Agency for immediate relief efforts, to agencies helping displaced residents find housing or rebuild their homes and to state and local governments rebuilding roads, bridges, utilities and other infrastructure. The request included \$13 billion for projects to reduce the damage the next time a natural disaster hits the region.

The aid request was briefly caught in a kerfuffle over the "fiscal cliff" negotiations, bringing considerable ire from area government officials, including Republicans frustrated with their own party. As Congress worked in the last week of 2012 to pass legislation to prevent major tax increases and across-the-board spending cuts, the House of Representatives reneged on a commitment to vote on a Sandy relief bill.

New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, a Republican, blasted House Speaker John Boehner (R-OH) for the delay. The day after the House adjourned without voting on the bill, Rep. Peter King (R-NY) blamed House Republicans: "What they did last night was put a knife in

the back of New Yorkers and New Jerseyans. It was an absolute disgrace."

Responding to the criticism, the House quickly approved \$9.7 billion in aid three days later, after the 113th Congress was sworn in. Still, 67 members, all Republicans, voted against the smaller package, most saying they thought it should be offset by spending cuts elsewhere in the federal budget. In the past, most disaster relief bills have been passed without offsetting cuts. President Obama signed the aid bill on Jan. 6; a second, larger relief package was scheduled for a vote on Jan. 15.

As Congress struggled to function, people affected by the storm, including scores of letter carriers who suffered personally and thousands more delivering their routes in devastated neighborhoods, continued to cope.

"It's not only draining physically to walk through the debris, it's tough mentally," Atlantic City, NJ Branch 370 President Chris Eck said. Seeing how customers are suffering takes its toll on letter carriers. "I take it personally—these people are my family."

Eck said that about a half dozen letter carriers in his branch had lost homes or suffered significant damage in the storm. His delivery area, he said, is "75 percent gone." Many homes in the area are under construction or repair, but a significant number of homes won't be rebuilt and the residents will never return.

Eck thanked his fellow letter carriers from around the country for donating uniforms, clothes and other items that poured into his branch following the storm.

In the days and weeks after the storm hit, New York and New Jersey experienced a surge of support in the form of donations to relief groups and seat-of-the-pants help wherever it was needed. For instance, in the January issue of *The Postal Record*, we described letter carriers in Virginia who quickly donated uniforms and shipped them

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- On your phone by texting "PERF" to 50555 (\$10 donation)*
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to New York letter carriers who had lost them in the storm, and we brought you the story of the letter carriers who saved a disabled man trapped in his house without power, and of the second carrier who invited the man to stay at his own home. These were a few of the numerous heartwarming tales reported in the media in the days and weeks following the hurricane. Stories like these—neighbors helping neighbors, or strangers sending relief from far away—give hope to victims and make them realize they are not alone in their struggles.

But recovering from Hurricane Sandy will take years, not weeks. Many people who lost their homes will rebuild. The roads and trains they take to work must be repaired. The places where they worked must be rebuilt, repaired or relocated. Ask the people affected by Hurricane Katrina on the Gulf Coast, where recovery efforts continue seven years after that storm hit New Orleans.

Relief agencies typically spend down their cash in the first few months after a tragedy. When they need to replace those funds, the headlines about the disaster have slowed to a trickle. That is the time when supporters show their true commitment to helping people, because most people have forgotten about the victims and moved on.

Postal workers affected by the storm are now seeking assistance from the Postal Employees' Relief Fund (PERF).

PERF provides assistance to postal employees who are victims of natural disasters or fires. It provides grants ranging from \$1,000 to \$14,000, depending on the total amount of qualified loss after insurance and other relief assistance, to both craft workers and managers.

"Hurricane Sandy hit a densely populated areas with great force," said NALC President Fredric Rolando, "and probably 100 or more postal workers either lost their homes and all their property or suffered severe damage. The government, private relief agencies and insurance usually don't provide everything these people need. Your donation to PERF will help fill the gap for many of your fellow postal workers affected by this historic storm."

You can mail a check to PERF at P.O. Box 7630, Woodbridge, VA 22195 or donate by credit card online at its website, postalrelief.org. You can also give to PERF through the Combined Federal Campaign (CFC); the CFC number for PERF is 10268.

If you need help from PERF, visit its website for eligibility and application information, call 202-408-1869 or send an e-mail to perf10268@aol.com. **PR**

Staten Island, NY Branch 99 carrier Jessica Grady walks past a destroyed house along her route.