Community Preparedness and Response

City employees from a variety of agencies coordinated with communities and volunteers.

Credit: Dave Seliger/OEM

Friends and family, neighbors down the block, and even strangers living in another borough—thousands of New Yorkers stepped up to help others during and after Sandy. This response was not only impressive; it has been critical to the recovery and rebuilding of hard-hit neighborhoods. The collaboration amplified the City's ability to address community needs.

Of course, community involvement should not be limited to disaster response. It also must extend to disaster preparedness, including efforts to improve communications in advance of an event that is reasonably foreseeable, such as extreme weather. During Sandy, the City launched an unprecedented campaign to warn New Yorkers of the impending storm. The City's Office of Emergency Management (OEM) sent electronic alerts to more than 165,000 residents, and NYC.gov provided information to four million unique visitors.

During Sandy, community leaders helped by reinforcing or tailoring messages to local populations, including both residents and business owners. For example, these leaders supported evacuation orders and encouraged companies to elevate valuable inventory and equipment.

But of course, community preparedness and response is most effective when it is coordinated closely with City activities, as facilitated by NYC Service and other City agencies. This requires the best possible information flows—from communities to the City, and from the City to communities.

Nowhere is information flow from communities to the City more important than with regard to vulnerable populations such as the elderly, sick, and disabled who may have a limited ability to help themselves or even to seek

help from others. That is why, prior to the arrival of Sandy, representatives of the City's Human Resources Administration (HRA), the Department for the Aging (DFTA), and the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) worked around-the-clock with their partner service providers to contact clients to advise them of safety protocols.

After the storm, however, these and other agencies found it challenging to confirm that known vulnerable clients were well, due to displacement, telecommunications failures, and other reasons. Although certain agencies had access to databases with client information, in some cases, legal and technical barriers prevented the sharing of lists across agencies. Although, ultimately, City agencies and community-based organizations conducted outreach that located and served thousands of vulnerable individuals, the lack of a consoli-

Delivery of emergency relief supplies

dated and accessible information source made this task both slower and more difficult than it should have been. In recognition of these issues, the City's *Hurricane Sandy After Action Report*, released in May 2013, called for "better integration of the City's data across all platforms and agencies to increase situation awareness and allow for more targeted, efficient response and recovery operations."

Although improving the City's access to information would be an important start, the City also needs the ability to push information out in a targeted fashion to threatened or impacted communities. Today, the City's Housing Maintenance Code authorizes the Department of Housing, Preservation, and Development (HPD) to require the registration of tenant-occupied residential properties, including basic contact information such as emergency telephone numbers. However, during Sandy, several deficiencies emerged. For example, HPD does not have the legal authority to require 1- and 2-family owner-occupied homes to provide emergency contact information. Moreover, existing law prohibits HPD from sharing emergency contact information with any other entity, including other City agencies engaged in emergency preparedness and response. These and other issues hampered the City's ability to communicate information in a targeted fashion.

As the City strives to become more resilient through investments in its buildings and infrastructure, it also must continue to call upon

communities to play a key role in emergency preparedness and response. The *After Action Report* outlines a series of strategies for accomplishing this goal. In addition to these robust strategies, in this report, the City also proposes two more ways of engaging communities: the development of a pilot community needs assessment and action plan for increasing local capacity, and an expansion of OEM's existing Community Emergency Response Teams (CERT). In addition, the City will pursue two measures to improve agencies' abilities to gather data from and disseminate information to communities on a real-time basis prior to, during, and after extreme weather events and other disasters.

Initiative 1
Launch a pilot program to identify and address gaps in community capacity

The local capacity to organize and support residents and businesses varies greatly from neighborhood to neighborhood. The City learned from Sandy that neighborhoods with higher community capacity tended to prove more resilient. Subject to available funding, the City will conduct a pilot community needs assessment in one to-be-identified Sandy-impacted community. Upon selection of the applicable community, OEM and the City's Center for Economic Opportunity (CEO) will work with local residents to identify community strengths and needs and develop a set of recommendations for improving local pre-

paredness and response capacity before, during, and after an extreme weather event. Following this "gap identification process," the City and the community subsequently will develop and implement a plan—as well as seek philanthropic and other potential funding sources—to address identified needs. The goal is to launch this pilot in 2013, and subsequently to explore expanding it to other neighborhoods if additional funding becomes available.

Initiative 2
Continue and expand OEM's Community Emergency Response Teams

OEM currently oversees the CERT program, comprised of well-trained volunteers that support individuals, families, and local organizations in their communities with emergency education, preparedness, and response, including assisting first responders. Several vulnerable neighborhoods, however, are underrepresented—with small CERT teams or none at all. In the wake of Sandy, the City will expand CERT, with an initial focus on Red Hook and the New York City Housing Authority's Red Hook Houses. In addition, as referenced in the *After Action Report*, the City will expand EmergeNYC, a volunteer program run by NYC Service. This program prepares large numbers of local volunteers to support impacted communities with high-impact tasks such as food distribution following a disaster. In addition, OEM and NYC Service, working with CEO, will pursue opportunities for low-income young adults to become engaged in the City's disaster-

Relief kits awaiting distribution to families in Red Hook

preparedness efforts. This will be done as part of a subsidized jobs program, such as NYC Recovers, and will provide participating young adults with a formal leadership role in their communities. Finally, OEM currently is piloting a simplified disaster response workshop for participants in the Neighborhood Leadership Institute, a program run by the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs and the New York City Community Trust in partnership with the Citizens Committee for New York City, to provide skill-building sessions for emerging immigrant leaders. If successful, the City will seek additional funding to replicate this training.

Initiative 3
Expand the Worker Connect information technology tool to serve as an Emergency Services Portal

Existing technical and legal barriers to information sharing limit the ability of City agencies to access limited but critical information about vulnerable populations, including the name, address, age, and medical condition of these individuals. Improving access even to this limited set of information could result in dramatic improvements to the City's ability to identify and respond to urgent needs during extreme weather events. Subject to available funding, the City, acting through the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services, will seek to expand the existing Worker Connect information technology tool to perform this critical function. Worker Connect currently provides access to select client information from data sources across five City agencies: HRA, ACS, the Department of Finance, the Department of Homeless Services, and the New York City Housing Authority. The City will seek to enhance Worker Connect with a new Emergency Services Portal, with access to a number of additional agency, nonprofit, and private data sources, subject to a review of legal and privacy considerations. The City also will seek to strengthen the functionality of Worker Connect's Emergency Services Portal by adding new reporting capabilities. Finally, the use of unique identifiers such as a Building Identification Number will allow this system to interrelate to other datasets or programs, as appropriate based on a legal and technical review of the desirability and feasibility of such connectivity. The goal would be to launch the effort in 2013, with full development expected to last up to four years.

Initiative 4
Explore the creation of a new online Emergency Notification Contact System

Although HPD's existing tenant contact data collection system is a useful tool, with certain improvements it could expand into a far more robust preparedness and response communication system. Subject to available funding, the City, through HPD, will explore the creation of an online Emergency Notification Contact System (ENCS) that would be distinct from, but complementary to, the existing mandatory housing registration system. Although a local law would be required to make participation in the ENCS mandatory, in the interim, HPD will pursue the creation of a voluntary database. This database would include not only basic and emergency contact information (including for 1- and 2-family homeowners), but also supplementary details where possible—including, for example, the availability of emergency generators, the type of building heating system, information regarding vulnerable populations, and other relevant information. The ENCS also could include the ability to receive electronic updates from registrants and to push messaging to targeted subsets of registrants. The system should have the capability to integrate not only with other HPD systems but also with other City databases for emergency purposes. Upon receipt of the necessary funding, HPD would manage the system's development, implementation, and maintenance, while working with other agencies to identify the requisite data and to provide access to those other agencies where appropriate and permissible. HPD also would work with the City Council to consider mandating participation in the ENCS.

NYC Service volunteers participating in beach cleanup