



THE CITY OF NEW YORK MANHATTAN COMMUNITY BOARD 3

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Community Board 3 (Manhattan) – Sandy: Lessons Learned

Introduction:

This report provides an account of events that transpired within Community Board 3 during and after Superstorm Sandy and recommendations for improved emergency preparedness. This report has circulated to each CB-3 committee and committee members, public members, and the public have all had an opportunity to comment on the report.

1. Communication, Evacuation and Emergency Shelters

- a. What weaknesses were exposed by Sandy?
 - Public pay phones should be kept in operating order during normal times, so that they continue to operate in case of a power blackout. Traditional public pay phones attached to a reliable landline network are critical to public safety. A few years ago, New York City justified its proposed elimination of fire alarm boxes from city streets by claiming that public pay phones can be used to report emergencies from the street. It is probably true that a public pay phone is probably funded through its billboard revenues, but the public payphone contract does require working pay phone service for the public.
 - In the initial aftermath, most of the work on the ground was done by non-profits and volunteers with resources provided by local elected officials. People found each other in the street and went exchanged names, blankets, food, etc. but there was no coordination, resulting in lots of overlap in some locations and under-serving of needs in others.
 - Seniors and others lacked basic knowledge of how to handle emergency situations (e.g., didn't know that you could pour water into the tank to flush toilet, didn't know about dangers of carbon monoxide poisoning from leaving the stove burners on and the oven open).
 - Gaps that existed before Sandy morphed into major vulnerabilities afterwards, people were getting by tenuously but as soon as a major support fell away, they were unable to function.
 - Challenges of working in a vertical, high-rise environment – for FEMA – rather than a suburban or rural horizontal, house-oriented environment).
 - Our local shelters were Seward Park High School and Baruch College. Seward Park and Baruch relied on back-up generators that ran out of fuel a few days later, necessitating the transfer of shelters to other locations. OEM selects shelter sites, and there are issues with these sites, including lack of wheelchair accessibility/ADA compliance.

- There were also concerns raised about mixing populations in the shelters in a way that is or could be perceived as being dangerous, thus discouraging people from using the shelter; DHS claimed that a court decision prohibits it from separating populations in an emergency. It was also noted that nursing home and assisted living residents were “dumped” in the shelter without any medical records. Many did not even know their own names.
 - There were too many volunteers at some shelters and not enough at others. It was difficult to identify who was in charge at some shelters.
 - People who were illegally subletting or otherwise living without a lease were not eligible for FEMA hotel or housing aid.
 - Almost all CB-3 were physically inaccessible (were not ready for those with special needs).
 - City not ready for "shelter in place." (e.g., couldn't charge motorized wheelchairs; couldn't get food, water, dry ice being given out, had no way to leave building or to tell people they needed help.
- b. What are lingering issues post-Sandy?
- Public Gathering Space: places for the dissemination of real information should be designated.
 - Tenants at Knickerbocker Village were expected to go to Seward Park High School for evacuation but had no way to get there. Why not go to PS 1 when it is only two (2) blocks away? Needed transportation.
 - Many who went to shelter had such a bad experience that they won't evacuate to them the next time and will take their chance sheltering in place.
- c. What are hidden impacts?
- Our local homeless shelters were also evacuated into other vacant shelters, the public shelters or told to stay with friends and family. DHS says single adult males from homeless shelters weren't put into the school shelters. City took on FEMA role thru City Hotel Program; claimed that public shelters and hotels all had on-site providers for case management (e.g., BRC, Samaritan Village) – still sheltering 800 households. Thanked CM Chin for role in bringing displaced constituents back to CD-1; DHS had to clear liability waivers for them to stay in local churches, etc. Now all shelters will have backup generators.
- d. What are future issues to consider?
- Can we devise simple systems to help organize volunteers during emergencies?
 - Could CB-3 get the ability to send out announcements about volunteer opportunities during public emergencies? This is infeasible and/or impossible during a power blackout, since the office computers and network required power.
 - Could some public locations be identified as “emergency centers” where people who wanted to volunteer or who needed help would know they could gather and share information? During power blackouts, phones and the internet aren't a reliable way for people to coordinate their efforts.

- Guide: a “What to Expect” brochure was suggested, somewhat along the lines of the City’s “Ready New York” brochure, but with updated information.
- In the future, we should have two (2) pre-arranged locations in our district for volunteers, etc. to assemble, plan and coordinate how to distribute resources. CBO’s should agree in advance who will handle particular geographic areas, needs etc.
- Emergency call lists for vulnerable individuals should be kept.
- Paper copies of resource lists, emergency information should be available for handing out—in three languages—many people could not turn to computers, phones, TV or radio to get that information.
- Need a plan to meet both special needs and general population needs in a shelter situation.
- Need alternative energy sources for emergency shelters (e.g., windmills, etc.) since generators are just meant for common areas.
- Need one cell phone charged at each shelter site with a hand-crank tool to charge the cells, DHS provided flashlights, batteries but ran out.

2. Quality of Life

- a. What weaknesses were exposed by Sandy?
 - a. What are lingering issues post-Sandy?
 - Public Safety: the impact of no lights on the perception of safety was discussed.
 - b. What are hidden impacts?
 - Serious funding issue, because of seriously understaffed agencies and local CBO’s too.
 - Many who earned a living off-the-books have lost their jobs and are ineligible for unemployment insurance. Lack the money to replace food, falling behind with rent, facing eviction.
 - c. What are future issues to consider?
 - Project Hope limited by funding rules about the materials it can give out and its content. The three (3) local providers-University Settlement, Hamilton-Madison House and Henry Street--are trying to jointly develop a directory/brochure. Money will be spent on promoting resilience, emergency preparedness, gaps in existing services.
 - Need CBO’s to be a recognized part of this essential neighborhood infrastructure. Resilient neighborhoods are the ones that know and trust their neighbors = interconnectedness.
 - Visiting Neighbors – will be training volunteers to help seniors prepare themselves for an emergency.

- How can we empower and fund local orgs who know tenants who can volunteer and connect with seniors in an emergency, like GOLES did? (Local neighborhood hubs to dispatch people). This points out the importance of keeping senior centers and other services nearby. They need their ever more limited staff to go out, to know their clients' situations, and all the CBO's need more funding to be able to do this.
- Talk to DFTA about the registry idea, high-rise evacuation chairs, and senior centers about critical infrastructure during budget time, mobility challenges.
- Registry idea – is it too expensive, too difficult to keep accurate and complete, phone lists no use if phones aren't working, gives false sense of safety that help is coming, voluntary nature means many will not sign up.

3. Housing Safety Precautions

a. What weaknesses were exposed by Sandy?

Knickerbocker Village

- Basements (interconnected buildings), three (3) boilers (\$300,000,) electric rooms (4) and gas meter rooms (16 rooms, 85 meters). All buildings operating on temporary systems power right now until better weather does not threaten existing power. Entire heating room and boiler system, electrical distribution system has to be replaced.
- Management: No evacuation plan in place or knowledge of who is in which apartment (elderly and handicapped).
- Communication: 2/3 of residents are Asian American, and 2/3 of them are Fujanese. TA has bi-lingual meetings, and one co-chair speaks Spanish, but everyone speaks English.

b. What are lingering issues post-Sandy?

c. What are hidden impacts?

- Health education issues: mold and its impact on public health should be addressed.
- No back-up for home health aides, with transportation stopped and most aides living far away, no one checked on these seniors and people with disabilities for 2-3 days in some cases.
- Medical equipment that some people require in their homes lost power.
- Stairway lighting. Most residential buildings rely on electric lighting in their hallways and do not have battery backup. It should be possible to have emergency LED lighting that could be powered by relatively small battery backup.
- Water in tall buildings. CB-3 has many tall residential buildings that were without water. In many buildings, even the low floors did not have water. Although the gravity-driven water supply continued in smaller buildings, the plumbing in most tall buildings is clearly fed from one system, which relies on pumping water to the top of the building.

- \$4 Million in temporary repairs and restorations (all IOUs). As a Mitchell Lama building, Knickerbocker owned by a conglomeration, in which some of the shareholders (Sachs, JPMorgan, APP (formerly Apollo Real Estate-own building near Two Bridges) and others, and NYS Housing and Community Renewal are funding. Gave a tour to shareholders, state elected official reps, and state engineers to look at basement and general damages. The state can mandate their replacement (under Article 2 and 4) and increase rents to meet expenditures.
 - Getting seniors to focus on preparing for an emergency is difficult, no one shows up for the trainings even when they give away gifts/incentive.
- d. What are future issues to consider?
- Attempts to keep lists of vulnerable building residents at each building who stayed and who left would be helpful.
 - Generators and expertise should be prepared in advance as part of evacuation and contingency plan.
 - Owners of residential properties in Zone A have got to inform their tenants that they are in a Zone A property and that when an evacuation order is issued, that it is mandatory to evacuate or it is a Class B misdemeanor. Owners must inform tenants what comes with living in Zone A.
 - Mandate management offices to hire tri-lingual staff. KVTA has staff that can translate but they couldn't get there during the storm. Agree that there need to be designated tri-lingual residents to be translators – staff and residents.
 - Any building in Zone A should be mandated to take steps to try to waterproof the building infrastructure. Doordams.com will give an idea of what they want to do in Knickerbocker Village. There should be some way to make the building owners to comply.
 - Knickerbocker Village: More support for conversion to fund temporary service (power and heat), then to pay for permanent restoration/replacements, and then to upgrade (waterproofing) buildings and utilities to help contain and limit damage.
 - New building code requirements are needed.
 - Multifamily highrise buildings will lose all water when power and water goes; goal is to protect the perimeter from flooding in the future, particularly for zone A properties.
 - Management offices of NYC public and subsidized housing need to know who is there that needs help (seniors, handicapped and medical needs).
 - Proposal: Start at the City Council (and state at some point) to start with the NORCs to identify who is in which unit who will need help. With state housing, the state can mandate developing and evacuation plan and annually updating it. Get it mandatory for NORCs (doesn't cost taxpayers) and NYCHA.
 - Get a CERT training program in the buildings as part of evacuation plan and have designated residents as translators and CERT trained.
 - Council Member Chin submitted legislation that residential building management have someone on staff to assist in emergency situations.
 - Conduct outreach to senior specific program (as well as teams for the disabled, youth, etc.) – working with a list from NORC.
 - Landlords ask tenants in advance if they'll need help in an emergency.

4. Transportation

- a. What weaknesses were exposed by Sandy?
 - There are still two (2) NYPD firehouses in the CB3 district that do not have emergency generators. These must be installed in Engine 28/Ladder 11 (222 E. 2nd St) and [I'm not sure which Chinatown firehouse was affected] either Engine 9/Ladder 6 (75 Canal St) or Engine 15 (269 Henry Street).
 - Access-A-Ride shut down within hours of evacuation notice so people with disabilities couldn't use it to evacuate.
 - Very few accessible taxis and only helps people in Manhattan who can afford them.
- b. What are lingering issues post-Sandy?
- c. What are hidden impacts?
 - The breakdown of the transportation system affected businesses and services that are important to public safety. Workers could not get to senior centers, meals on wheels, and health, medical and pharmacy services.
 - Traffic signals. Traffic congestion was an obvious problem that was partially mitigated by the deployment of Traffic Enforcement Agents. Pedestrian safety was an issue everywhere affected by the blackout.
 - Many staff for senior centers, home care workers, health providers do not live in the communities they serve and could not come to work.
- d. What are future issues to consider?
 - How the Avenues were monitored to provide for safe traffic flow was also considered.

5. Schools

- a. What weaknesses were exposed by Sandy?
- b. What are lingering issues post-Sandy?
- c. What are hidden impacts?
- d. What are future issues to consider?
 - Schools should only be used for a short period as shelters and people should be moved into hotels as soon as possible.

6. Utilities

- a. What weaknesses were exposed by Sandy?
 - Inability to communicate on the ground—phone lines were out, cell phone towers lost power, cell phone batteries drained and there was no place to charge them. Lack of electricity meant there were no copy machines to create flyers to distribute to residents.
 - Utilities were faulted for inconsistent policies; it was suggested that Verizon and Time Warner provide 48 hour batteries in their service instead of useless 8-hour batteries.

- b. What are lingering issues post-Sandy?
- No redundancy in power and communication.

- c. What are hidden impacts?

Many important systems rely on electricity to operate. During an extended power blackout such as the one caused by Sandy, public health and safety are affected by the loss of:

- Communication. Both cell phones and landlines were affected by Sandy. Cell phones must be recharged regularly. Cell phone towers also need power and although some do have backup power arrangements, those did not last very long. The landline network was destroyed in many areas that were flooded.

- d. What are future issues to consider?

- Utilities: for the future, generator back-up plans should be developed.
- Require telephone and wireless companies to provide mobile communications and wireless charging stations.
- Improve ability to communicate during a power outage by requiring better batteries on wireless relay spots.

7. Residential and Commercial Buildings

- a. What weaknesses were exposed by Sandy?

- Much of the Lower East Side is built on landfill, leading to flooded basements.
- Boilers are in basements, leaving them vulnerable to destruction.
- Aging infrastructure, utilities (electricity, telecommunications).
- Poor planning for people with special needs.
- Poor evacuation process left vulnerable residents trapped in their apartments.
- Inability to communicate on the ground—phone lines were out, cell phone towers lost power, cell phone batteries drained and there was no place to charge them. Lack of electricity meant there were no copy machines to create flyers to distribute to residents.
- Most buildings lack generators to pump water.

- b. What are lingering issues post-Sandy?

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- Most buildings lack generators to pump water.
- c. What are hidden impacts?
- Extended water outages as large buildings lack generators to pump water in an emergency.
- d. What are future issues to consider?
- Remedy the problems with evacuation procedures, particularly with respect to people with special needs.
 - Require tall buildings to have backup generators, at least for water pumps.

8. Small Businesses

- a. What weaknesses were exposed by Sandy?
- Insurance: various aspects of insurance were mentioned, including liability, property, business interruption, spoilage, and comprehensive flood insurance. All agreed that insurance coverage was useless. Suggestion was made that the NYS Department of Insurance follow-up on how to mitigate this issue in future events.
 - Government Loans: people were generally critical of the forum at which government agencies distributed information and loan applications; from information available, apparently 100's of applications were distributed, some were submitted, but few loans were actually given; the consensus was that this effort was generally useless.
- b. What are lingering issues post-Sandy?
- c. What are hidden impacts?
- Lack of Organized Businesses: subsequent to the storm, it becomes obvious that small businesses need to have an organization (particularly in the East Village) that will assist with many of the issues noted here.
 - Rights of Tenants: Questions were raised concerning the rights of business tenants due to lack of services.
 - No Access to Cash: the inability to access banks or ATMs caused a cash flow crisis for businesses.
 - Health, medical and pharmacy services were typically shut down during the power blackout, as were most businesses.
- d. What are future issues to consider?

9. Parks, Playgrounds and Ball Fields

- a. What weaknesses were exposed by Sandy?
- b. What are lingering issues post-Sandy?
 - Damage or loss of tree canopy in parks, playgrounds and street trees, and need to expedite their replacement.
- c. What are hidden impacts?
- d. What are future issues to consider?
 - The resiliency and permeability of materials used along the East River to saltwater and inundation. Resiliency of new parkland to be designed for esplanade and Piers.
 - Parks should place sandbags at doors of most vulnerable buildings to prevent water from coming in
 - Equipment such as push blowers should be placed on high shelves so that will not be inundated and destroyed by water.

10. Storm Surge Protection

1. What weaknesses were exposed by Sandy?
2. What are lingering issues post-Sandy?
3. What are hidden impacts?
4. What are future issues to consider?

11. City Government

- a. What weaknesses were exposed by Sandy?
 - CAU liaisons should be kept in neighborhoods of their assignment during emergencies to use their expertise and connections to best help their assigned communities. The CAU liaisons are the Community Boards' official communication link with the City Administration to receive planning and other information. During the Sandy crisis, the CAU liaison for CB-3 was removed from Lower Manhattan to another devastated area and CB-3 was left without any links for planning, information, or an official connection for help or information.
 - Lack of communications to community board from city, state, and federal agencies.
 - The lack of City communication, particularly to affected Community Boards was highlighted.
 - Confirmed need for FEMA to have teams with local knowledge of the urban environment. Without that knowledge, FEMA can't make good decisions. For example, the FEMA reps assumed everyone living in NYCHA public housing was an undocumented immigrant and therefore ineligible.

- Major FEMA issues with applications (e.g., claimed FEMA gave people misinformation, told them they wouldn't be eligible for help and not to bother applying, or couldn't reach FEMA with computers and phones not working) and how to appeal (Vanessa Diaz noted that many residents didn't realize that they could appeal and gave up or the paperwork involved was overwhelming).
 - Feds not prepared for the challenges of cultural diversity of CB-3 or the effects of power outage in high-rise buildings (e.g., seniors' medications/refills/refrigerated medications spoiled/local pharmacies closed/doctors unreachable to write new prescriptions; transportation for homecare service providers).
- b. What are lingering issues post-Sandy?
- Lack of communications to community board from city, state, and federal agencies.
 - Difficulty with FEMA registration and general communications. Told she would have to lay out the money for a replacement freezer, submit, and appeal. Received only \$250 for freezer, refrigerator, etc. worth far more. Affirmed Project Hope staff's findings. Said NYCHA staff failed Campos completely. Elected officials and CBO's were only help, forced to give out resources on the street. No way to get basics like diapers and milk, were relying on help from local churches. NYCHA residents continue to feel abandoned.
- c. What are hidden impacts?
- The FEMA office at Mott Street did not know that Project Hope existed until the day of our meeting on February 12th, 2013.
 - Bureaucracy of funds not given to NYCHA tenants (e.g., claims that wealthier residents more likely to get FEMA assistance than poorer NYCHA residents didn't give NYCHA residents money to replace refrigerators, air conditioners and other smaller items).
- d. What are future issues to consider?
- Outdated Flood Maps: the previous FEMA and OEM flood maps obviously have to be revised to take account of the areas actually affected by flood waters.
 - FEMA needs to understand urban environment and needs (e.g., diverse languages and ethnic backgrounds, gave out outreach materials in Lower East Side in Italian which is not a commonly spoken language but not Spanish or Chinese).