

# HELPING THE STRANDED AT HOME

A door-to-door canvassing in communities devastated by Hurricane Sandy helped care for those who did not evacuate.



Breezy Point, New York, in November 2012, shortly after Hurricane Sandy. Photo by Pauline Tran.

**H**urricane Sandy's massive waves roared over the beaches and boardwalks of the Rockaways and Coney Island. Nine days later a nor'easter beat down on the devastated neighborhoods.

The Mayor ordered evacuation. Most of the residents of single-family houses and smaller apartment buildings were accounted for, either sheltering elsewhere or returning to piece together their battered homes and lives.

But some people were unable or unwilling to leave their homes. Without lights or elevators, residents couldn't get down the stairs of their high-rise buildings, including New York City Housing Authority buildings.

Many important questions remained. How many were stranded 10 or 15 stories up? What shape were they in? What did they need to survive and stay healthy while the community got back on its feet?

On November 9, the New York City Health Department dispatched key senior staff to command a force of over 500 City, State and federal disaster and emergency medical personnel to go into these high-rise buildings and canvass door to door, checking the residents' wellness, recording—and responding to—their needs.

Simultaneously, the Health Department, in collaboration with other City agencies, assessed whether building services and conditions were sufficient for habitability, including electricity, heat, water, working elevators, accessible entrances and safe indoor and outdoor environmental conditions.

The conditions the teams found varied from the uncomfortable to the unlivable. Gas stoves used for heat could result in carbon monoxide poisoning. Indoor plumbing systems were failing.

## Some high-rise residents couldn't or wouldn't leave.

Under the Health Department's coordination and leadership, City, State and federal staff, including medical professionals and para-professionals, worked together to fill prescriptions or triage, treat or facilitate evacuation of those in medical

distress. Emergency medical technicians carried people down to the street.

As medical tents were set up and dialysis centers, pharmacies and other providers re-established themselves on the ground, the teams could direct the more mobile residents there for assistance. For nonmedical needs like food, water or space heaters, the Health Department connected people with other City or federal agencies. Local pharmacies were soon recruited to fill and, later, deliver prescriptions.

The teams brought more than practical help, pills, water or blankets. They were friendly faces in times of need.



**175,000**

residences canvassed by Health Department-led teams from November 2012 to January 2013



**1,800**

New Yorkers received food and water during a visit



**1,300**

New Yorkers received a follow-up assessment from the Visiting Nurse Service of New York



**600**

New Yorkers received medical care at their homes

## Impact

- From November 9, 2012, to January 20, 2013, the Health Department-led teams canvassed approximately 175,000 residences, gave in-home medical care to 600, evacuated approximately 50 for medical reasons and coordinated with the Visiting Nurse Service of New York to provide follow-up assessments of 1,300 people.
- The Health Department is tasked with preparing for and conducting Post Emergency Canvassing Operations in future emergencies. In order to further develop this capability, the Health Department is creating plans and conducting training and exercises.

## Critical Need

- Continue support for communications staff to develop and disseminate clear public messages to encourage evacuation as appropriate.
- Maintain and enhance program support to develop plans, trainings and exercises to ensure a constant state of readiness to support NYC's most vulnerable after a disaster.

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NYC Public Health and Healthcare Preparedness and Response REPORT

