



The Voice of the Human Services Community

## **SANDY RECOVERY COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

**January 2014**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Over the last several months, Human Services Council (HSC) has been serving as the convener and coordinator for human services organizations engaged in Sandy recovery. Among our focuses have been:

- Facilitating a Disaster Recovery Group composed of leaders of human services organizations involved in Sandy recovery
- Liaising with City, State, and federal government on behalf of the human services sector
- Ascertaining needs for services among those affected by Sandy through continuing conversations with those in the field
- Conducting and reporting findings from a survey designed to afford a better understanding of the Sandy-related experience of human services organizations
- Organizing a forum, a year after the storm, at which leaders from the human services, public, and philanthropic sectors assessed the recovery to date, strategized about how to proceed and considered how to prepare for another disaster

The over-arching finding from these efforts is that a great many people affected by Sandy are still struggling sorely, and that the recovery effort, while having made much progress, remains far from complete. Accordingly, HSC has developed comments and recommendations reflecting the human services sector's views about ways in which the recovery should be best supported and how the nonprofit and public sectors can coordinate to prepare for another disaster. Over the next weeks and months, we intend to interface closely with the incoming City Administration, State government and the philanthropic sector as planning for expending the additional \$3.5 billion in federal funds for the recovery unfolds and programs and policies are formulated.

We recognize the fluidity of the recovery and that conditions are likely to continually change and, accordingly, we expect that these comments and recommendations will also evolve.

## **STRATEGIES FORWARD**

### **HOUSING**

Sandy caused profound damage to housing. In New York City alone, more than 25,000 households have registered for City government's Build it Back program, which assists with repair, rebuilding and reimbursement and several thousands more residing in Long Island and elsewhere in the State have registered for New York Rising, the State's similar program. Registrants, however, have only recently begun to receive assistance and it appears that the Federal funds behind the program will permit only a portion of those requesting support to be accommodated. Of particular concern, undocumented immigrants are ineligible for these programs and it has been quite difficult to relocate affected renters because of the City's shortage of available affordable housing. Also, it appears that funds may not be available to support households with moderate incomes, and there is reason to expect that, absent assistance, many will contend with financial hardship. So, we expect that the housing recovery will last several years and that large sums of additional funds will be necessary to assist all in need.

#### **Recommendations**

##### **Long-Term**

- *The City's inadequate supply of affordable housing has been exacerbated by Sandy and it is imperative that ambitious plans for creating additional affordable housing be developed.*
- *Alongside an affordable housing initiative, economic development, job creation and employment training programs should be expanded with a view to equipping Sandy victims and others to be better able to afford market-rate housing.*

##### **Short-Term**

- *Convene a task-force of experts from the public and nonprofit sectors charged with arriving at creative and inter-sector strategies to accelerate the housing recovery.*

- *Ascertain the number of registrants to Build it Back and New York Rising who can be assisted with funds currently available and the number of those in financial need who will not be assisted. Then, request additional funds from the federal government or make available State and City funds to serve all who are deserving.*
- *Develop specialized plans to assist renters, perhaps including comprehensive efforts to facilitate relocation of renters to the limited number of neighborhoods in which affordable housing is available.*
- *Prioritize assistance to those in public housing and elsewhere still coping with mold another other health-threatening conditions.*
- *Explore the possibility of building temporary housing, perhaps borrowing models utilized by the military.*
- *Perform outreach to determine the degree of housing assistance needed by undocumented immigrants and others ineligible for Build it Back and New York State Rising, and utilize City, State and philanthropic funds to support this population, in part through community-based rebuilding programs involving Long-Term Recovery Groups.*
- *Explore the possibility of legislation or regulation that would permit illegal immigrants to participate in housing assistance programs funded by the Federal government.*
- *Pursue discussions with the banking sector about avoiding foreclosures, when warranted, for Sandy-affected homeowners.*

## **DISASTER CASE MANAGEMENT AND SOCIAL SERVICES**

The State's FEMA-funded Disaster Case Management (DCM) program is a primary source of support for those coping with the effects of Sandy. Through the program, participants are helped to navigate public systems and gain access to a range of services. To date, more than 7,300 households have participated in the program and more than 5,600 of their cases remain active. And, new cases continue to be established at a steady pace. Also, a considerable amount of DCM and similar programs currently in operation are funded by philanthropic sources, which will be depleted with then next 12 to 18

months. Until housing problems are resolved, DCM and related services – like mental health counseling, legal support and cash assistance – will remain very necessary. So, we are very concerned that the State’s DCM program is slated to expire in less than a year and that FEMA regulations prohibit the program from being extended. Also, we must be very mindful that vulnerable populations affected by Sandy – such as seniors, the home-bound, people with disabilities and immigrants – may require specialized assistance.

### ***Recommendations***

- *Make use of funds from public sources other than FEMA, such as CDBG, SSBG, or City and State tax levy funds, to extend the State- and philanthropic- funded Disaster Case Management programs for one year while leaving open the possibility for further extension if demand for the program persists.*
- *Functioning in concert with the Disaster Case Management (DCM) program is the Unmet Needs Roundtable (UNR), through which eligible DCM clients receive cash grants to cover essential expenses associated with recovery that cannot otherwise be reimbursed. Consistent with our expectation that DCM will remain necessary well beyond the term of the current program, we expect that UNR will also be needed considerably into the future. While grants to clients are funded through philanthropic sources, we believe it is appropriate that government cover the expenses of administering the UNR, thereby enabling the entirety of the philanthropic contributions to directly support clients. Accordingly, as part of the extension of DCM, funds should be made available for this purpose.*
- *Convene a task-force of public sector and nonprofit leaders to design plans to address unmet needs for social services, with a particular emphasis on accommodating vulnerable populations. This exercise should include sharing of best practices and making maximal use of already existing programs.*

## **VOLUNTEERISM**

Volunteers from New York and well beyond have been instrumental in the recovery. In the weeks following the storm, some 65,000 spontaneously came forward and many thousands more have generously given time and shared skills, including in the rebuilding of housing. Government and nonprofit organizations have expended extensive efforts to engage volunteers, but we have not always been organized enough to make the most of their efforts. Very much related, it is too often forgotten that nonprofit organizations managing volunteers require funds to do so effectively.

## ***Recommendations***

- *A centralized, open-source database of volunteers available to assist with disaster recovery, and indicating specialized skills and availability for particular geographies, should be established and maintained. Government should initiate the project and perhaps a nonprofit organization could be contracted to manage it. This resource will allow for efficient deployment of volunteers when disasters occur.*
- *Nonprofit organizations likely to be directly involved in disaster recovery should receive training designed to equip them to effectively manage volunteers.*
- *While utilization of volunteers is cost-effective, managing them, as stated, does require funds. FEMA regulations about how nonprofits engaging volunteers can be reimbursed should be clarified and publicized and, if FEMA funds prove inadequate, other public funds should be made available to ensure that nonprofit organizations engaging with volunteers are resourced to properly do so.*
- *Government regulations regarding how volunteers are certified should be reviewed and, where appropriate, revised to ensure efficiency. Training to volunteers provided by nonprofit organizations, when appropriate, should obviate the need for training from government.*
- *Policies and procedures for making use of out-of-town volunteers should be reviewed to ensure that such volunteers are most effectively deployed and accommodated.*

## **DISASTER PREPAREDNESS**

While the response to Sandy has certainly been admirable, there is wide agreement that it could have been more effective if the human services sector, in partnership with government, had been better prepared. Over recent months, government has been formulating plans to react to future disasters, in large part based on the experiences of Sandy. But, while the City's emergency management, police, fire and other first-responding systems are afforded resources to prepare, the nonprofit sector lacks the necessary infrastructure. It is crucial that we harness the energy and expertise that has accumulated over the last year and build a disaster preparedness function for the human

services sector that interfaces efficiently with government, delineates roles and responsibilities and ensures that all actors are trained and equipped.

### ***Recommendation***

- *Government, perhaps supplemented by philanthropy, should make available funds for an ongoing disaster preparedness function for the human services sector that would – in partnership with government – include such activities as joint planning, table-top exercises, training, determining how best to engage volunteers, information-sharing and conferences.*
- *Government and the human services sector should enter into a Memorandum of Understanding that outlines plans by which inter-sector communication and coordination will occur in the event of a disaster.*

## **NONPROFIT REIMBURSEMENT**

Government and foundations have distributed considerable amounts of funds to human services organizations involved in Sandy recovery to cover certain recovery-related expenses. However, these efforts have apparently been incomplete: in a survey of human services organizations recently conducted by HSC and the School of Public Affairs at Baruch College Center for Nonprofit Strategy and Management and the Baruch College Survey Research Unit, only 20% of respondents indicated that they expected to be fully reimbursed for damages incurred and services provided as a result of the storm. Ordinarily, many human services organizations operate under financial constraints and they should not be expected to absorb the financial costs of disasters and a failure to reimburse them could detract from their ability to fulfill their ongoing missions.

### ***Recommendations***

- *Government and philanthropy should fully reimburse human services organizations that experienced a financial deficit as a result of Sandy.*
- *Design reimbursement processes in ways that allow for easy participation of organizations without advanced fundraising ability.*
- *As has occurred in California, government should establish funds to be made available to human services organizations in the event of future disasters – so they may rapidly respond with the knowledge that their finances will not be destabilized.*

## **ABOUT HSC**

The Human Services Council (HSC) represents providers of human services to New York's vulnerable populations with concentration in such realms as early childhood education, youth development, health, mental health, aging, housing, homelessness and employment. Among HSC's focuses are public policy and advocacy, technology, government contracting and disaster response and preparedness. These efforts raise awareness about the vital role of the human services sector and support the provision of high-caliber services to New Yorkers in need.

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