

SURVIVING SANDY

After a natural disaster strikes, people suddenly appreciate the things they take for granted, such as power, heat or Internet service—or the mail. So when millions of postal patrons in New York, New Jersey, and surrounding areas

hit by Hurricane Sandy in October saw letter carriers delivering the mail through damaged neighborhoods, sometimes even *during* the storm, they noticed.

Letter carriers were a lifeline in the weeks and months after Sandy. They delivered and picked up vital things like medicine, checks or insurance documents for people who were suddenly cut off from the outside world by gasoline shortages and lost phone and Internet connections.

But the effect letter carriers had on the public went beyond what was in the residents' mailboxes. Merely by being seen in the neighborhood doing their jobs despite the obstacles, letter carriers lifted the spirits of the victims.

"My mailman is a superhero," Staten Island resident Susan Sheehan told the *Staten Island Advance* newspaper. "The very next day he delivered and has been fantastic about climbing around debris and ensuring mail and packages don't get dirty or wet." The sight of someone tenaciously providing a service that connects them to the rest of the world, after waking up to see their homes and neighborhoods devastated by wind and seawater, was a needed psychological boost. It was a signal that things will be normal again; that they hadn't been abandoned.

"I've cried and cried, and I'm so tired I can't cry anymore," a Toms River, NJ, woman wrote to her letter carrier. "Thank you for stopping in and giving me moral support."

"While my husband and I were walking in the muck in our house, we heard a

pounding on the door. It was the letter carrier handing me my medicine," a customer in Brick, NJ, wrote to her post office. "I want to find out who he is. I want to take him to dinner. I love the Postal Service."

"I call it a stabilizing effect on the community," Long Island Merged Branch 6000 President **Walter Barton** told *The Postal Record*, referring to letter carriers who walk their routes in the aftermath of a disaster. "It gave a lot of comfort." Sometimes it was emotionally tough for the letter carriers, though, to see the damage and hear the sad stories. "They are kind of like a shoulder to cry on."


Barton described the damage to Long Island, and working conditions for carriers, as severe.

"The whole South Shore was devastated by the hurricane."


As with dozens of postal facilities in the region, several post offices on Long Island were damaged by floodwater, including some in the coastal towns of Island Park, Atlantic Beach and East Rockaway. Some post offices took weeks to reopen, he said, while others were expected to stay shut until the end of December. Power outages compounded the problem. Most mail operations were relocated to other postal facilities or to temporary buildings, extending commutes for many letter carriers.

Last month, NALC President Fredric Rolando toured areas hit by the storm, visiting post offices and talking to letter carriers about the difficulties they have faced, both on their jobs and at home. "You can't really understand the scope of the damage this storm brought until you see it firsthand," he said.

As the first outsiders to reach some communities in the hurricane's aftermath, letter carriers sometimes found themselves helping patrons in crisis. Philadelphia television station WPVI reported that Philadelphia Branch 157



Long Island Mgd., NY Branch 6000 member Kendall Weaver delivers mail at Rockaway Beach after Hurricane Sandy.



The Beachwood, NJ, post office—normally a two employee office—is now housing employees from four other offices.

member **Dan Bailer** rescued 82-year-old Terry Miller, who had fallen from his wheelchair. Miller, who lived alone and had lost power in his home, was stranded for 10 hours. He yelled for help when he heard Bailer at his door. Bailer opened the door and found Miller, covered him with a blanket and called 911. "It was a blessing—a real blessing," Miller said.

Miller had a medical alert device with him, but it wasn't working. "I just happened to be in the right place at the right time," Bailer said.

The rescue didn't end there. Bailer, who was filling in that day for fellow Branch 157 member **Mike Petroski**, told Petroski about Miller's troubles. Petroski has served Miller on his route for 12 years and knew him well. Instead of letting the elderly man stay in his home without power, Petroski invited Miller to stay at his house.

"I wasn't going to let him stay with no heat or food," Petroski said.

Some letter carriers and other postal workers were victims of the storm as well as heroes, of course.

As reported in the last issue of *The Postal Record*, Rockaway, NY, letter carrier Rick Gold died when his home flooded during the storm. Barton estimated that 80 to 90 letter carriers suffered property losses ranging from total loss of their homes to loss of cars.

Like giant vacuum cleaners, hurricane winds rotate and rise, lifting a bump of seawater several feet higher than normal. When that storm surge reaches land, it can inundate the coast as fast as any flash flood.

On the night the storm hit the coast, Branch 6000 letter carrier **Jim Dorman** and his son Jared, 22, were busy putting their valuables on tables in their one-story home in East Rockaway, preparing for some water to get inside the house. It came faster and higher than they ever imagined.

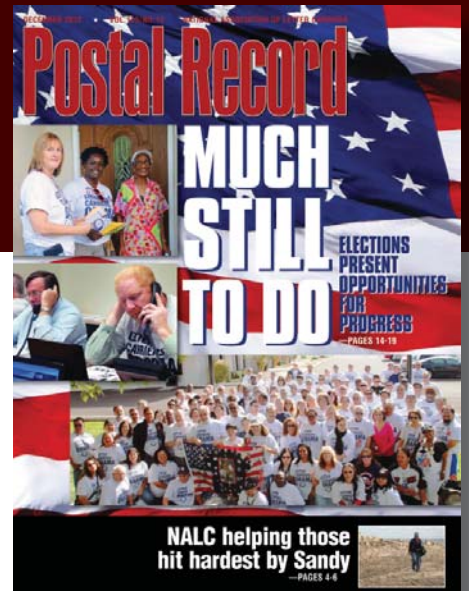
"I saw water trickling into my living room, and I said to my son, 'Grab the dog, grab some bedding, let's get in the attic,'" Dorman said. Water rushed in and flooded the entire floor. The next morning, the water was gone, but Dorman could see the high-water mark from the damage—up to three-and-a-half feet. His refrigerator had floated away and his deck had ended up propped against his back fence.

"I lost everything," he said. "We weren't expecting this." Fortunately, Dorman could stay with relatives nearby, and his home will be repaired.

At least eight letter carriers in New York Branch 36, most from Rockaway, lost their homes and all their possessions—even their uniforms, Branch President **Charlie Heege** said.

Within days, these carriers were again working in uniforms, thanks to quick action by **Brian Congleton**, a steward from Northern Virginia Branch 3520.

After the storm, Congleton called carriers in the New York-New Jersey area he had met as a Leadership Academy student



NOTE: A printing error in the December 2012 *Postal Record* article on Sandy relief efforts led to a page being left out. The full article can be found at nalc.org/news/precord/articles-index.html

Toms River, NJ Branch 2128 member Amy Masker drives around obstacles to complete her route.



The mailbox attached to this deck survived a four-mile journey from the far shore in this picture. Brick Town, NJ Branch 5420 member Dan Eagen opened the mailbox and found mail that survived the journey.



A harm to one is a harm to all

Donations to PERF can be made:

- Online at postalrelief.com
- On your phone by texting "PERF" to 50555 (\$10 donation)*
- By sending a check made payable to "Postal Employees' Relief Fund"
- By contributing to PERF through the Combined Federal Campaign (CFC) by designating #10268

Your donations are tax-deductible.

*See details on text donations on the back cover

last spring and learned that New Yorkers needed uniforms. Eight boxes of uniforms and some cash donated by carriers in his branch soon were on their way to New York. "The carriers walked out with uniforms on—they were very appreciative," Heege said. Letter carriers from all over the country sent similar donations to branches throughout the region.

For most letter carriers, getting to work in lower Manhattan was a challenge in the weeks after the storm, Heege said. Flooding and loss of power left commuter trains and subways idle. Once at work, many had to shift to alternate facilities because of power loss or simply work in the dark using flashlights or cell phones to light their way. On the street, the lack of working traffic lights made for hazardous and disorderly traffic, though Heege said he hadn't heard of any accidents involving mail vehicles.

Elevators in most high rises were non-functional, too. "That made it hard for a lot of people," Heege said.

Staten Island Branch 99 President **Paul Alexander** reported the tragic news that a letter carrier in his branch had lost her mother in the storm and a clerk in the South Shore Annex also had died. Looking at the way the storm surge tossed homes and boats everywhere, Alexander said he thinks there still are victims to be found in the debris.

At least 28 letter carriers in his branch, he estimated, either lost their homes or experienced serious damage.

"You don't appreciate the force of nature until you're in the middle of it," Alexander said. He described the scene near coastal areas of Staten Island after residents had begun to clean their flood-stricken homes: "There were piles and piles and piles of possessions in front of every house" waiting for garbage pickup. "There were a few places where houses weren't there anymore."

On the other hand, the response from regular folks from around the country has been heartwarming, he said.

"There are a lot of people volunteering, and trucks from all over the country with boxes of food and cleaning supplies," Alexander said. Residents of New Orleans, a city still recovering from its own hurricane damage in 2005, sent supplies. Food trucks delivered fresh hot meals to volunteers and displaced residents, free of charge.

With so many postal employees affected, there are sure to be many calls for help to 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. PERF has provided nearly \$15 million to more than 3,000 postal employees affected by hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, floods, wildfires and home fires since 1990.

"PERF is sure to face an unprecedented number of requests for help after this terrible storm hit such a densely populated area," President Rolando said. "There has never been a more important time to give to PERF to assure that the people in our postal family who need help can get it."

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. To donate \$10 by text message, text "PERF" to 50555. 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**