

CAU in the News



November 2012

Community Access Unlimited's mission is to provide community access through effective and comprehensive support services for people with disabilities and at-risk youth, giving them the opportunity to live independently and to lead normal and productive lives in the community.

MEMBERS AND STAFF OF COMMUNITY ACCESS UNLIMITED THANKFUL THEY TRIUMPHED OVER SANDY

Emergency brings early sense of Thanksgiving to community of 3,000 Union County members and 800 staff

Hurricane Sandy met a formidable opponent when she ran into the members and staff of Community Access Unlimited (CAU), who pulled together to not only weather the storm but triumph over it. As Thanksgiving approaches CAU's 3,000 members who reside in Union County and staff of more than 800 are thankful their collective strength saw them through the crisis.

CAU provides housing and support services to people with disabilities and at-risk youth. When Sandy blew through Union County, 182 of the agency's 203 housing units lost power, leaving 457 members with disabilities without light or heat, many of them with special medical requirements.

When Sandy passed CAU's staff kicked in to ensure that the members were safe, fed, comfortable and even entertained in the days following the storm, according to Aisha Arroyo, assistant executive director of developmental disabilities residential services.

"Everybody pulled together," she said. "It was a teamwork process. Everyone understood the members came first. We knew we had to get together and make sure everything worked smoothly."

The challenges were enormous.

"Think about what people had to deal with in their homes – no power, trees down everywhere, limited gasoline – then multiply that by 182 and add special needs, such as oxygen and medicine that needs to be refrigerated," said Sid Blanchard, CAU executive director. "But the response by our staff and members was amazing."

With a staff that ranges from office and facilities personnel to counselors, therapists and nurses, the agency's employees went all out the do whatever was needed for the members, according to Arroyo. Ensuring member safety took top priority and by the day after the storm every one of CAU's housing members with disabilities had received a personal visit from a staff member.

"We had no trouble getting staff to make it into work," Arroyo said. "They were texting each other and picking up each other up to save gas. It took one of our behaviorists and hour-and-a-half to come in from the next town over but she made it."

Next came feeding everyone. Power was restored to the CAU main building quickly and that became the command center, according to Cara Pavia, coordinator of marketing and fundraising at the agency. Hot meals were made in the building's kitchen for those members who could travel there and were delivered to CAU properties throughout the county for those who could not.

The need for gasoline was another challenge, both for agency vehicles traveling throughout the county and for generators supplying power to properties where it was essential.

"A bunch of the office staff would take an agency vehicle and wait in line for gasoline or go find somewhere where they could fill up," she said. Staff also caravanned to Pennsylvania with gas tanks, traveling as far as Bethlehem.

With safety, food and fuel covered, CAU next turned to addressing the emotional health of the members, according to Arroyo. Staff held a number of entertainment events at the main building, including a dance party, karaoke and movie days. One of the best received films was "Beauty and the Beast," as that will be the play CAU members stage next summer, according to Arroyo.

"Members said this was their chance to practice and tryout for parts," she said. "We had members battling to play Mrs. Potts."

That positive attitude was prevalent throughout the membership all during the storm and its aftermath, according to both Arroyo and Pavia.

"We doubled up with the people we support so there would be double the staff so we could give relief to those who were on duty for 16-plus hours," Arroyo said. "Our members were great about it."

Member Marla Rosa lives in a CAU property in Plainfield and she and her housemates were moved to another property for about a week following the storm. Rosa did not mind at all.

"Our power went out Monday night and we didn't move until Wednesday," she said. "We had to bear with it until we got rescued. After that it was great because I had the entire upstairs to myself (at the new residence). I grabbed my laptop and that kept me busy for a while"

Peggy Knouse lives in a CAU property in New Providence.

"Our power was out for about a week but we made out okay," she said. "I came here for a movie one day."

"They put in a Christmas movie and got in the holiday mood," Arroyo said.

"It was more like Thanksgiving, bringing our community together, coming together for meals, being thankful we had the strength to make it through the storm," said Mercedes Witowsky, CAU's associate executive director. "A Community Access Unlimited Thanksgiving."