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City task force urges FEMA to help faith groups recover from Sandy



Photo by Georgine Benvenuto

Long way to go: Councilman Mark Treyger announced the results of a city report looking at how well houses of worship recovered from Hurricane Sandy, and made the announcement at Coney Island Cathedral.

By Caroline Spivack
Brooklyn Daily

A city task force is calling on Congress to amend [the legislation governing the Federal Emergency Management Agency](#) to make houses of worship eligible for federal recovery funds.

A report released by the Hurricane Sandy Houses of Worship and Charitable Organization Task Force chronicles the difficult road to recovery faced by houses of worship that were wrecked by Hurricane Sandy, but whose leadership nonetheless stepped up to provide crucial humanitarian services following the storm. The separation of church and state shouldn't be a barrier to government aid for houses of worship that have helped people in a disaster regardless of their religion, said the local pol who pushed for the task force.

"I fully respect the constitution, but if there is a public benefit being provided then I think the public should be there for houses of worship during their time of need," said Councilman Mark Treyger (D-Coney Island). "They were not preaching religion when they helped house people, feed people, clothe people. And quite frankly, I think there is a moral imperative to work to reimburse and repay them for their crucial work."

[The Hurricane Sandy Houses of Worship and Charitable Organization Task Force worked for six months to detail how, in the weeks after Sandy, churches, synagogues, and mosques became de facto relief centers — stepping in to fill gaps in government relief.](#)

But the strict separation of church and state in the law governing federal disaster aid has left many faith-based organizations that helped storm victims after Sandy [cut off from help from the federal government and struggling to navigate the recovery process.](#)

“We lost all of our paper work. We had nine feet of water, all of our documentation was destroyed with the flood,” said Bishop Waylyn Hobbs Jr. of the Coney Island Cathedral on Mermaid Avenue near W. 29th Street. “That made the process very challenging.”

Damage at Coney Island Cathedral was appraised at roughly \$400,000 after the storm, according to Bishop Hobbs. And to add insult to injury, the Federal Emergency Management Agency only offered a small business loan at a three-percent interest rate.

“I definitely wasn’t pleased with the offer,” said Bishop Hobbs. “It didn’t make a difference if you were a believer or not when we were helping people. I think the government really needs to revisit how they deal with houses of worship after storms.”

Now, five years later, and even with a \$200,000 grant from the aid organization Samaritan’s Purse, there is still repair work to be done at the church. And dozens of other places of worship across the borough and city are in the same situation.

To better prepare those more-than-1,300 houses of worship in the city’s coastal flood zone for future emergencies, the report proposed a blueprint of sorts to help the city, faith-based organizations, and other groups better coordinate their resources and improve communication among themselves.

“We have to see ourselves as a web, if you will, between government, the non-profit sector, and faith communities, because working together is the only way our communities will be more resilient for disasters to come,” said Peter Gudaitis, the executive director of New York Disaster Interfaith Services, an organization of faith-based social service providers and charitable organizations. “These aren’t just places where people worship, they are the fabric, the glue that holds communities together.”

The task force is in the process of taking an official record of the services houses of worship provided as well as the damage they suffered through interviews and by piecing together the scattered records.

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