



### Disaster Response — Success Stories

# After Hurricane Sandy, Soup Kitchen Staff Makes Sandwiches by Candlelight

As Hurricane Sandy headed toward New York City in the last days of October, 2012, Michael Ottley, director of operations for Holy Apostles Soup Kitchen in Manhattan, was thinking of the 1,000 disadvantaged people who rely on the ministry for a daily meal.

The night before the storm, Ottley sent a text message to his kitchen staff, saying that whatever happened, the soup kitchen would continue to serve whomever came with whatever it had. If staff could make it into work safely that week, there would be work to do.

**“The soup kitchen in 30 years has never missed a day — through blackouts, a fire and blizzards.”**

Holy Apostles Soup Kitchen is run by Church of the Holy Apostles, an Episcopal parish in New York City’s Chelsea neighborhood. The 30-year-old ministry offers a hot meal every Monday through Friday to anywhere from 1,000 to 1,200 people a day. It also connects guests, many of whom are homeless, to services such as medical care, nutrition advice and counseling.

When Hurricane Sandy made landfall in the region on October 29, it destroyed homes and businesses along the New York and New Jersey coastlines, caused widespread flooding and power outages and disrupted transportation in the region for weeks. The neighborhood where Holy Apostles Soup Kitchen is located lost power for a week. Cell phone service was unreliable. Subways weren’t running and bus service was spotty.

But the day after the hurricane, the staff members who could make it in to work by 6 am were busily making tuna sandwiches by candlelight in the church mission house. Volunteers who lived in the senior apartments next door came over to help. And throughout the week, people from the wider community dropped off hundreds of ready-made sandwiches. Meanwhile, the numbers in the soup kitchen line doubled that week and remained high for the next three months.



#### Biography



Michael Ottley is director of operations for Holy Apostles Soup Kitchen in New York City. Yvonne Cassidy is the soup kitchen’s development officer.



#### Fast Facts



CONGREGATION:  
Church of the Holy Apostles

CONGREGATION SIZE:  
180 members

LOCATION:  
New York City

POPULATION:  
8.2 million

DISASTER TYPE:  
Hurricane

DISASTER RELIEF:  
Soup Kitchen



Key to getting the food out was getting the word out, especially when the soup kitchen began to run low on sandwiches. But the church's email was down and cell phone service was spotty. Yvonne Cassidy, the soup kitchen's development director, had put the ministry on Facebook and Twitter less than a year before. She knew the soup kitchen had about 1,500 Facebook fans, which included volunteers, but she had no idea where they lived or who was local. She decided to put her cell phone number and an appeal for sandwiches on Facebook and Twitter.

"The response was overwhelming," she said. "One church dropped off 18 bags of sandwiches. And there were tons of individual people who made sandwiches at home, and made them with their kids. Literally, my phone was ringing all day long."

People were hungry to respond, she said. Inviting them to make sandwiches gave them something simple to do that met an immediate need. The activity also allowed families to respond together, and gave parents a way to talk with their children about how the disaster affected vulnerable people.

The donations that poured in allowed the ministry to make it through the week without opening its refrigerators. As a result, none of its regular food items perished, and when the power came back on, the soup kitchen was able to resume its hot meal program, Ottley said.

**"Don't ever underestimate the power of social media. I don't know what they would have done 10 years ago."**

With 30 years of daily service under its belt, the soup kitchen had some built-in preparedness strategies in place. Staff had often discussed at their meetings what to do in case of an emergency. Long-term volunteers had been through several disasters in the past, and knew that they could plan to show up to help.

"We know we're going to serve a meal," Ottley said. "It might not be the meal we planned to serve. We've got to adjust and serve what we have."

Typically the soup kitchen feeds people at tables in the church. With the power out in the building, the ministry switched to the outdoor food distribution line that they typically employ on Good Friday, when the church is in use.

In the following weeks, many people who were displaced by the storm were resettled into hotels in the neighborhood. The soup kitchen expanded its offerings to absorb the increased need. It was also prepared to offer referral and counseling services to those who needed help after the storm, Ottley said.

## Tips for Running a Post-Disaster Meal Program



- Have a plan for reaching staff and volunteers, especially if you know ahead of time that you might lose power or cell phone service.
- If you have social media such as Facebook and Twitter in place, use it to inform and rally the wider community.
- Plan and maintain supplies for non-refrigerated menus.
- Have a plan for an alternative serving location if your typical serving area is unusable.
- Adapt your offerings to reflect increased demand for your meal program, and plan for new needs for disaster-related counseling or referrals.

## Additional Resources



For more information on similar topics see the following online resources in our Resource Library.

([episcopalrelief.org/resourcelibrary](http://episcopalrelief.org/resourcelibrary)):

- **"Using Your Church as a Donations Depot"**
- **"How To: Use Your Church to House Volunteer Groups"**

For more information on Episcopal Relief & Development's U.S. Disaster Program visit [www.episcopalrelief.org](http://www.episcopalrelief.org).