Western Pennsylvania volunteers help in Sandy cleanup

By Adam Smeltz and Amanda Dolasinski

Published: Wednesday, November 21, 2012, 10:32 p.m.
Updated: Thursday, November 22, 2012

With Hurricane Sandy churning off the Eastern seaboard, The Salvation Army of Western Pennsylvania girded for the worst at home.

When the superstorm struck 400 miles away, the group quickly switched gears, sending seven volunteers with thousands of free meals and cleanup kits for victims and relief workers along the New Jersey coast.

“It really opens your eyes to more of the world,” said Bryan Michael Musser, 19, a Salvation Army volunteer and Pittsburgh Technical Institute student who spent a week cooking grilled-cheese sandwiches and hot dogs in coastal areas.

He comes from modest means. But “seeing that (devastation), you get to really appreciate what you have — and the family you have,” Musser said.

Hundreds of Western Pennsylvanians and local companies committed time and resources to help those affected by Sandy and some continue through the holidays. Many — including 41 volunteers with the American Red Cross — made cross-state trips to distribute food, water, health care, blankets and other relief to those left struggling.

Authorities blamed the late-October storm for more than 100 deaths, widespread power outages and as much as $50 billion in damage from New England to the southern coast.

For Red Cross volunteer Barb Stefanik, 55, of South Park, philanthropic contributions go beyond the tangible.

“I think all people just want to be valued as a person,” said Stefanik, a registered nurse who spent about 10 days at a Bergen County, N.J., nursing clinic. “To suffer that kind of devastation without any warning ... people were just lost.”

And they remain with her as she celebrates Thanksgiving, she said.

“I feel what I did is just a tiny little bit in comparison to what they need,” Stefanik said. “It’s making me be more conservative. I’m not an extravagant person, anyway, but I’m very conservative and cautious about wasting anything so that I can support and donate.”

Kenneth Brown’s 10-day volunteer deployment to Staten Island, N.Y., was his sixth for the Red Cross in three years. Nasty storms sent him to West Virginia and Florida this year.

“I’m thankful we’re in Pittsburgh,” where “we keep missing these hurricanes and storms by some luck,” said Brown, 63, of Jefferson Hills. “It goes north of us or east of us. We’re very fortunate recently.”
Other agencies contributing to relief efforts include the North Side-based Brother's Brother Foundation, which received more than $60,000 in donations and sent nine tractor-trailer loads of supplies, President Luke Hingson said. The Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank is sending two workers to assist a food-rescue agency in Queens.

More than 400 Pennsylvania National Guard members assisted New York and New Jersey for five to 13 days. They included dozens of troops from the 28th Military Police Company in Johnstown and the 171st Air Refueling Wing in Coraopolis, which have members from the Pittsburgh area.

A collection of Pennsylvania paramedics and police also made the trek.

In Toms River, N.J., Pennsylvania state troopers supervised and helped people pack suitcases after the storm hit Oct. 29. Emotions were tender as they returned to gutted homes.

“I've never seen destruction like that before,” said Brian Gross, a trooper with the Kiski Valley barracks. “They get in their door, and the first thing they do is burst into tears.”

He was among 120 Pennsylvania troopers who volunteered, the first in their department to be dispatched for disaster clean-up.

Separately, a Pennsylvania strike team sent about 100 ambulances and 50 support vehicles throughout New Jersey. The team answered 480 calls in three days in Hoboken alone, said Fayette EMS paramedic Steve Rugg.

“They were in a lot of trouble,” Rugg said. “… Most of the city was under six feet of water.”

Some assistance arrived straight from individuals.

Jake Riemer, 28, of Mars rented a trailer and packed it with donated food, water, blankets and second-hand clothes. Co-workers and customers at his employer, Laird plastics in Gibsonia, pitched in. The company covered transportation costs.

The haul included more than 70 cases of water, 24 gallons of bleach and “food beyond belief,” Riemer said. He and a friend, Brian King, 35, of Gibsonia delivered the goods Nov. 9 in the Manahawkin, N.J., area.

“When it's 30 degrees out at night, I can't imagine being without anything,” Riemer said.

He said the storm victims “were so stoked” over the donations. “Pretty much tears in their eyes.”

“It makes you realize what you have — family, the important things in life,” he said. “I just thank God every day for the blessings he's given me.”

Adam Smeltz and Amanda Dolasinski are staff writers for Trib Total Media.