

## **Hurricane Sandy: A Super Response to a Superstorm**

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After Superstorm Sandy made landfall in southern New Jersey last October, she swept up the East Coast in a rampage so intense that, months later, thousands of families remain in temporary housing, and many more have homes but no heat. New York City and the surrounding areas were especially hard hit. Throughout the storm-battered region, cable companies sprang into action to help their employees and communities cope with the damage—and the stress it generated. Recently, I asked three of my colleagues to tell us how their employers rose to the challenge, both during and after the storm.

### **The Show Must Go On**

As the storm bore down on Time Warner Cable's Media Division NY1 broadcasting studio on 15th Street, the journalists on duty had a single intention: cover the story. And cover it they did—around the clock for weeks—despite the fact that, power knocked out, they worked mostly in the dark and took the stairs to and from their offices on the 6th floor.

The human resources department supported the “troops” by providing food, water, supplies and hotel accommodations. Said Seth Feit, Regional Vice president of Human Resources for TWC's East Region, “This was a challenge because all the stores and hotels had also lost power. Employees stayed at nearby hotels, sleeping in cold, dark rooms, and we had food delivered from midtown.”

Meanwhile, HR managed to keep a full accounting of everyone throughout the storm and beyond, though the team had challenges of its own. One member of the HR team, Christina Bisconti, now on maternity leave, was pregnant when the storm hit her town of Hoboken. She walked down four flights of stairs to evacuate her building, then waded through cold water and sewage, toting her laptop computer. She sought refuge with her family in Pennsylvania, and from there worked tirelessly to support TWC employees who were still without basic comforts.

Scripps Networks Interactive (SNI) also made locating employees its first priority. Said Crystal Washington, VP of External Relations, “Many people had to relocate during the storm and had limited connectivity, so it took some ingenuity on our part to verify everyone's safety.”

Once that mission was accomplished, SNI launched shuttle service to move commuters into and out of Manhattan from Long Island and New Jersey, and also dispatched laptops and other access devices to employees who needed to work from home. Other offices also pitched in to share the load. Said Washington, “Employees in areas not

affected by the storm worked many extra hours to ensure that the show went on—literally!”

### **Delivering Immediate TLC**

Discovery Communications also kept close tabs on its more than 500 employees based in the Big Apple. Said Eric Hawkins, SVP of HR, “We activated Empathia, the company’s disaster response phone system, to assess employee status and well-being. With this data in hand, we were able to provide needed resources and services as employees and their families recovered from the storm.”

The offerings ran the gamut from meal delivery and child-, pet- and eldercare to stress counseling, temporary housing assistance and resources for handling financial and home insurance issues. Employees who still had power and roofs over their heads were encouraged to work remotely until their childcare, transportation and recovery needs were met. For those less fortunate, the New York office became a home away from home, providing cots, sleeping bags and blankets, along with shower and kitchen facilities. Throughout the ordeal, said Hawkins, “Our onsite Wellness Center provided medical support, as many physicians’ offices and pharmacies were closed.”

As soon as conditions allowed for safe travel, SNI also opened its New York and Washington offices to employees and their families who had lost power and running water, and worked with local hotels to provide accommodations for those whose homes were unlivable. Although the D.C. office remained open throughout the storm, many employees suffered significant damage, and one saw her home destroyed. Her colleagues leaped in with gift cards, along with donations of clothing and other necessities.

As SNI’s New York offices began to reopen, said Washington, “The HR team provided lunch for employees who made it in so they didn’t have to venture out and search for restaurants that were open. This was a no-brainer for us—we *are* the home of Food Network, after all!”

### **Digging in for the Long Haul**

Replacing a fridge full of food after a three-day power outage is one thing. Picking up the pieces after Mother Nature slams you with a storm of historic proportions is a whole different matter. Once cable employers had ensured the immediate well-being of their team members, they set about providing for the long-term needs of those whose homes—and spirits—had incurred severe damage from Sandy’s tirade. Across the board, companies established emergency relief funds to help employees and their families meet the extraordinarily high cost of getting back on their feet. Employers also provided pay advances and helped storm-affected employees arrange for hardship withdrawals from their 401(k) accounts.

### **Extending a Helping Hand**

While management was working to ease the financial burden for their companies' storm victims, less-directly affected employees were leaping into the fray all across the stricken region. For example, said SNI's Washington, "Many of our departments organized volunteer groups and went out to serve food or help with clean-up efforts. And all of our offices collected items requested by the American Red Cross, including toiletries, towels, blankets and stuffed animals, and shipped them to affected areas."

Discovery employees launched coat drives for badly damaged parts of the New York and Washington metro areas. The company also is partnering with New York Cares to provide approved time off for day-long volunteer stints "mucking out" homes in the hard-hit Rockaways. Thinking farther ahead, said Eric Hawkins, "We are exploring plans to host a larger, companywide Superstorm Sandy rebuilding trip in late spring."

In short, Sandy may be gone, but for dedicated cable employees, cleaning up the mess she left behind remains a work in progress. Stay tuned for more....