



# ***Superstorm Sandy***





**W**hat if you weren't simply a voyeur to a tragedy, but instead were living it first-hand? What if you were a field general and you weren't afforded any weapons? How would you react when Armageddon actually happened? What would you do? This is what happened to us in New Jersey recently as a result of Sandy. Like many of you in this industry, I am a take-charge guy. But what if there is nothing to take charge of? You see folks, pre- and post-planning for emergencies is so vitally important.

I wrote in the first few lines above "what if?" Well, "what if" happens. Superstorm Sandy destroyed my state. Not just on the coast—the entire state. You saw it on the news. And for us, we became the news.

What lessons can I share with you about this experience? First, you have to focus on the human element—business becomes very secondary. My office manager, by the way, is still coming into work every day; and that, in and of itself, represents a profile in courage. She lost her home, her cars and all her worldly possessions. Mind you, she did not live at the beach. So if anyone thinks this disaster is strictly a beach event they are sorely mistaken. Some of my regional managers cannot see their homes because the National Guard won't let them.

I have a community on the Raritan River, a good five miles from the Hudson Bay. In another clear profile in courage, my manager hauled 107 new appliances up to the second floor in preparation for Sandy because we had lost 48 units during Hurricane Irene in late August 2011 and we had just rebuilt them.

He put generators on stilts, anticipating the storm surge. What brilliance and forethought. But it was to no avail—the waves that came and landed five miles inland were higher than the stilts.

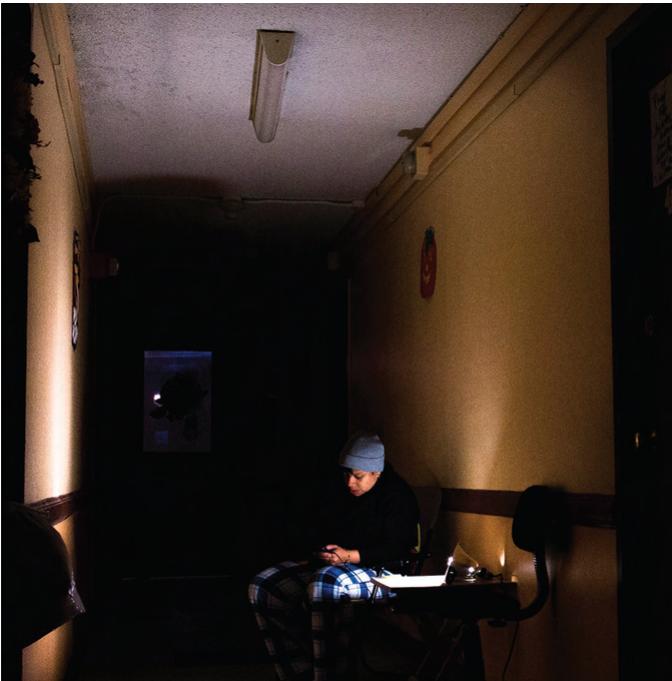
Less than two weeks after Sandy, we were hit by a Nor'easter and got a foot of snow. The damage has doubled. So for now, since this all started, our situation hasn't gotten better, it has gotten worse.

By nature, we are problem-solvers. What do you do when the problems are so ominous, and yet the best of us simply do not have answers? You learn, you adapt, you overcome. I have seen people become desperate. I have seen in the past few weeks the best of human kind and the worst. When an emergency hits your area, which side will you fall on?

Do you in your business include worst-case scenario planning? My suggestion is you should. I have been reminded of them many times during the past few years.

## ***What Happens When Disaster Hits Home?***

*BY MIKE BEIRNE*



A resident uses her cell phone in the darkened hallway of her mother's apartment building in Hoboken, N.J.

Tornados, earthquakes, hurricanes, fires, blizzards: the worst-case scenario does happen—and never so as starkly as in this most current event. What you go through first as problem-solvers is the enormity of the event. Where do you start? And once you start, what are some really important things you learn? How can you infuse them into your business plan? We thought we were smart and had portable generators everywhere, ready to go. But are they useful when you cannot get gas?

## What We Learned

- Make sure your communication network is well defined, and ensure that you have redundancy in that communication. Cell towers can go dark or have reduced signal just like any other technology. When that happens, mobile phones and email do not work very well. Texting seemed to, and it became my lifeblood for 10 days. Make sure you know your options.
- There are people who will take advantage of you. Because for them, pardon the pun, disasters can bring a windfall. So, pre-approve a disaster recovery contract with a nearby service provider so that you have one if you need it. Hopefully, you never will. But at least you'll have one written in stone.
- Be compassionate. Your employees and your residents are at wit's end. You need to be the voice of reason and care. It's not about property management, it's about humankind. If you manage that way, people will respond that way.
- Don't ever lose your sense of humanity. People count on you: understand their conundrum and show them how you and they can prevail—even if you don't believe it yourself.
- Realize the proverbial "stuff happens." It isn't going away, work it, think it and solve it.
- Anticipate ancillary damage. Freezing pipes, compromised gas lines and lack of any vital resources. Be better than the captain of the obvious.
- Use your friends in our NAA network. That is one reason why association membership is valuable. I had an informative conversation with NAA-member professionals from New Orleans. Their wisdom guided me. New Orleans AE Tammy Sponge and her group had developed emergency "best practices" based on what happened during Hurricane Katrina. It was great. But even better—and most comforting—was to be able to hear from her the progression of events and how they sounded very similar. She was able to help me see the proverbial "light at the end of the tunnel." And that can really help.
- Understand the psychological impact that this will have on your staff members. They have been dealing with all of your residents' problems and their own. You reach a breaking point. I know I did. I have to assume all your people did, too.

Folks, it's not all about business. First and foremost, it's about human beings. You have to adjust your decision-making to comprehend and understand that it's for both your residents and your employees. I cannot begin to tell you everything you should do; I am not sure I figured it out myself. In the end, we learned that most of us are vulnerable. Collective thought prevails.

You have a lot of very good people on your staff who can adapt and think. Realize how fortunate you are to be part of that very special group. Hug your friends, your loves and your best work associates. They truly could be gone tomorrow.

We often watch what happens in the world as if it's a video game. The next disaster that strikes could happen to you. And when it does, it will dramatically change how you view your responsibilities and your perspective. **NAA**



*Mike Beirne is Executive VP of Kamson Corporation, in Englewood Cliffs, N.J. Kamson operates approximately 90 communities and more than 15,000 units, throughout New Jersey and the Northeast.*