



American Planning Association
New York Metro Chapter

Making Great Communities Happen



Getting Back to Business

Addressing the Needs of Rockaway Businesses Impacted by Superstorm Sandy:

A Report by the American Planning Association-New York Metro Chapter for the Rockaway Development & Revitalization Corporation ¹

¹ *Photo credits, flickr: Little Bill and duloz cats*

Executive Summary

The American Planning Association–New York Metro Chapter (APA-NYM) prepared this report to summarize a six-month effort by a team of planners to assess how Superstorm Sandy impacted businesses on the Rockaway peninsula located in the borough of Queens in New York City (See Map 1). The report identified issues and made recommendations for short- and long-term planning strategies to help businesses recover and plan for the future.

APA-NYM partnered with the Rockaway Development & Revitalization Corporation (RDRC) to develop a plan to understand the major challenges facing businesses after Superstorm Sandy. RDRC proved an invaluable partner as a grassroots organization with over 30 years of experience supporting businesses in the Rockaways. As a key piece of the issue-identification effort, APA-NYM conducted over 100 interviews with businesses in three commercial corridors. The majority of these businesses cited the need for financial assistance to repair and rebuild their livelihoods. Based on this need, APA-NYM recommends provision of a staffed, mobile office, similar to New York State Department of Labor’s One-Stop Career Center, to educate and provide technical assistance to businesses applying for grants, loans, and other resources and funding opportunities.

This report intends to serve RDRC, APA, and affected communities. First, APA-NYM seeks to provide strategic guidance to its client Rockaway Development Revitalization Corporation (RDRC) on how to best address many of the challenges, needs, and opportunities facing Rockaway businesses. Second, this work seeks to provide a model that other APA chapters can replicate to address the needs of communities impacted by natural disasters.

This report is comprised of six sections:

- I. Introduction
- II. Scope of Work
- III. Results
- IV. Recommendations
- V. Looking Ahead
- VI. Lessons Learned

I. Introduction

Superstorm Sandy devastated homes and businesses throughout the Northeast. According to estimates, the storm caused over \$19 billion in damages in New York City alone.² In New York State, 48 people died because of the storm. Amidst the challenges of residents recovering their homes and school children trying to return to classes, this report found hundreds of businesses attempting to recover their lost inventory and reopen to serve their community.

A presence in Rockaway since 1978, RDRC, a community development corporation, promotes Rockaway businesses and community development throughout the peninsula. When Superstorm Sandy hit, RDRC sprung into action. Superstorm Sandy displaced or damaged nearly 1,000 businesses in the three commercial corridors represented by RDRC. The historic storm event underscored the need for RDRC, but overwhelmed the capacity of organization. To determine the best way for the area to move forward with the recovery process, APA-NYM worked with RDRC to thoroughly assess the challenges, existing resources, and short- and long-term needs of the Rockaway area and to develop a set of recommendations to help guide the recovery process for businesses.



Map 1: The Rockaway peninsula is part of Queens, NY and is situated along the Atlantic Ocean, fewer than 20 miles from Manhattan.

² Mayor Bloomberg releases Superstorm Sandy federal aid request. November 26, 2012. News From the Blue Room. Retrieved April 4, 2013 from www.nyc.gov

Before the storm, over 115,000 people called the Rockaways home. In 2010 the per capita income was \$21,172, which is \$5,000 less than the per capita income in Queens and over \$40,000 less than in Manhattan. The dearth in personal and community resources adds an additional layer of vulnerability. This vulnerability extended to the business community as many businesses were not eligible to apply public assistance programs due to poor credit scores and limited resources which hindered their ability to pay back loans.

During Superstorm Sandy, Rockaway suffered considerable damage. The water level rose over 10 feet during the storm due to the combination of storm surge and an astronomical tide. Ninety percent of the 1,100 businesses were initially closed, and over 60 percent remained closed four to five months after the storm. Breezy Point, at the far western end of the peninsula, was severely damaged by a fire that destroyed over 130 homes.³

II. Scope of Work

On November 26th, 2012, approximately two weeks after the storm, APA-NYM's Economic Development Committee and Housing Committee met Kevin Alexander, Executive Director of RDRC, to discuss support from APA-NYM for RDRC's business re-mobilization efforts post-Superstorm Sandy.

The site visit included a tour of the three primary business districts affected by the storm. As a result of the meeting and site visit, APA-NYM defined a scope of work to develop a short-term business-recovery plan for the organization. The objective was to support RDRC in making informed, strategic, resource-allocation decisions in the early stages of the recovery effort.

APA-NYM divided the work into four subcommittees that reflected the community's most pressing needs: shelter and housing, transportation, food access and business outreach, and data.

In Phase I of the work, APA-NYM's team sought to identify small businesses' most urgent needs and the area's challenges, existing resources, and barriers to preventing businesses from reopening. The team gathered raw data on the post-Sandy environment in the Rockaways to start this effort. This data collection included a mapping exercise, the identification of local Rockaway businesses, and collaboration on a small business survey.

³ Blake E, Kimberlain T, Berg R, Cangialosi J, Beven J. Tropical cyclone report, Hurricane Sandy. *National Hurricane Center*. Retrieved April 3, 2013 from http://www.nhc.noaa.gov/data/tcr/AL182012_Sandy.pdf

Phase II of the work consisted of the APA-NYM team determining what steps were needed to help businesses understand their short-term needs and pressing items to address before re-opening shop. This determination included reinvestment options (e.g., insurance, potential property buy-outs), provision of a repository of resources and contacts for business recovery, and development of a set of recommendations that RDRC can pursue to meet the needs of businesses stakeholders over the short-term and long-term.

Shelter and housing

RDRC's shelter and housing services are primarily focused on foreclosure prevention services. A crucial consideration residents' face in the post-Sandy recovery period is whether or not they will be able to afford the almost assured increase in insurance rates if they chose to remain in Rockaway over the long-term, and whether they will have access to the grants and loans necessary to maintain this increased cost of living. As a result, the Shelter & Housing subcommittee focused on researching grant opportunities for housing assistance.

Transportation

Superstorm Sandy caused major transportation issues in Rockaway. The storm demolished parts of the subway track along New York City Transit's Rockaway branch (See Map 2). The Rockaway Branch is the only subway service to the peninsula and a lifeline for residents accessing the rest of New York City.

Six-months after Sandy, subway service is still suspended. This has left 35,000 daily customers without a direct line to Howard Beach, Queens.⁴ The Long Island Railroad (LIRR), a commuter rail line, provides service to the Rockaways. Superstorm Sandy impacted service on the LIRR after the event. Fortunately, MTA restored that service in November. However, LIRR proves economically unviable as a daily option for many Rockaway residents. A monthly pass on the LIRR costs \$242.00 as opposed to the \$112.00 monthly subway pass. Furthermore, a Rockaway resident must purchase a subway fare in addition to the LIRR ticket as the two services do not provide a free transfer. MTA offers a weekend City Ticket reduced fare program for LIRR rail stations within New York City. The Far Rockaway station is the only station not participating in this program within the City of New York because the Rockaway line enters Nassau County briefly before veering back into Queens on a trip to Penn Station. To understand the area's transportation needs and opportunities, the APA-NYM team engaged in discussions with local stakeholders and transportation officials and created the Public Transportation Routes to Rockaway map (See Map 3).

⁴ Rebuilding the Rockaways after Hurricane Sandy: The damage. *Metropolitan Transit Authority*. Retrieved April 2, 2013 from http://www.mta.info/nyct/service/TheDamagefromHurricanSandy_11_08_12.htm

Map 2: Washed out A Train tracks in Rockaway, Queens.
 Photo credit: Metropolitan Transportation Authority



Map 3: Public Transportation Routes to Rockaway

Public Transportation to Rockaway



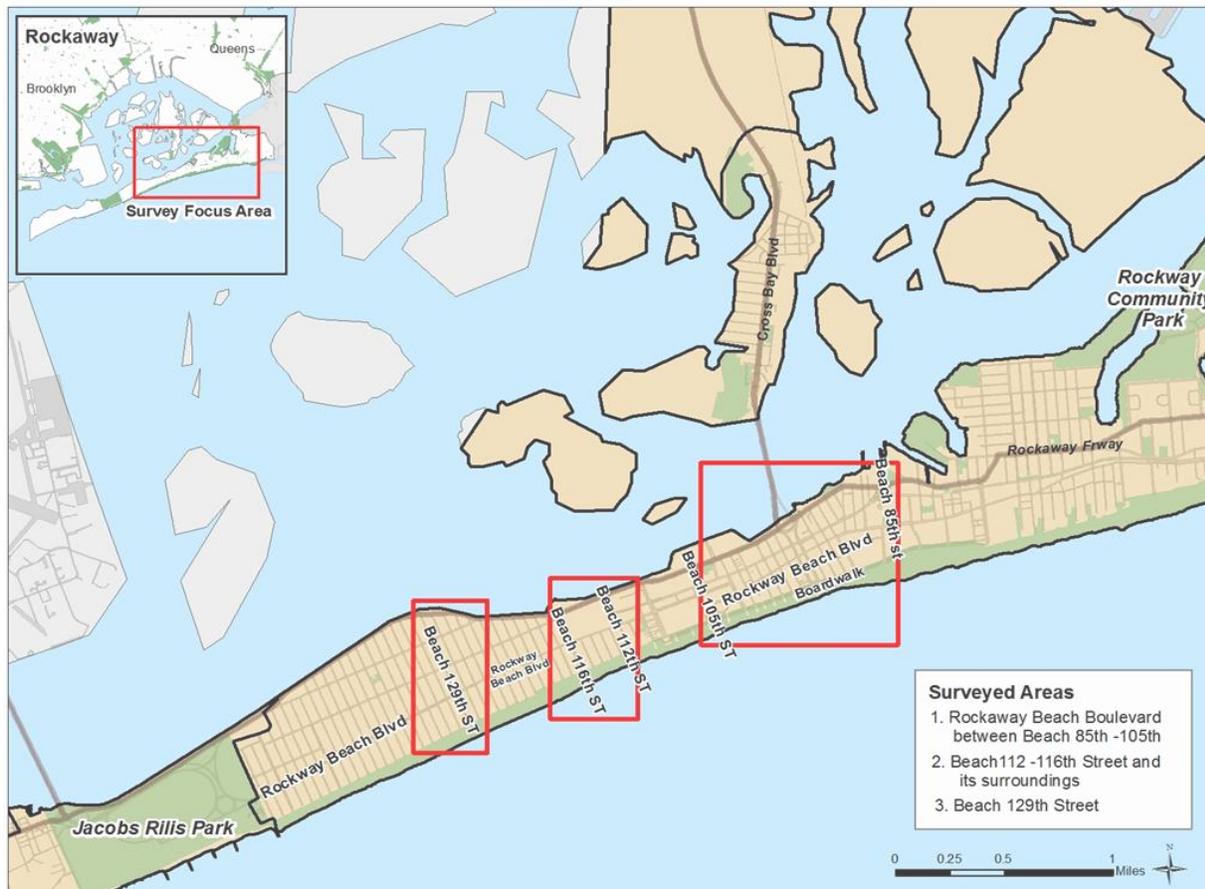
Food access and business outreach

The food access and business outreach subcommittee conducted a market analysis of Rockaway, developed structured interviews for local businesses, and led the interview teams.

In January, the team conducted a pre- and post-Sandy food and beverage industry market analysis. The pre-market analysis looked at patterns in the relationship between consumer spending and local businesses activity for five zip codes in the Rockaways. Pre-Sandy, approximately 1,100 businesses set up shop in the Rockaways. Even before the storm, Rockaway had a high level of retail leakage— meaning Rockaway residents spent their income on goods and services outside of the area— nearly \$6 million. Conversely, local businesses depended highly on the local customer base because of the physical separation of the Rockaway peninsula from the rest of Queens and limited public transportation options to travel there. Sandy shut down 90% of all businesses in the catchment area immediately following the storm. Furthermore, the team's analysis found that 60% of businesses closed four months following the storm. This closure led residents to find goods and services elsewhere while causing local shop owners to lose valuable business revenue. This problem is particularly acute because even before the storm, businesses located in Rockaway had the capacity to meet only about 30% of local demand, forcing residents to shop elsewhere.

A series of qualitative and quantitative interview questions were developed in collaboration with RDRC. Questions were designed to meet RDRC's priority—to identify Rockaway businesses' needs and to understand how RDRC could assist them in the recovery process. Many businesses expressed an urgency to focus on short-term needs; as a result, long-term needs were not addressed by the interview forms. RDRC identified three main economic corridors (See Map 4) for conducting the interviews: Beach 116th Street, Beach 129th Street, and Rockaway Beach Boulevard. Because Far Rockaway businesses (at the eastern end of the peninsula) were not as significantly damaged during Superstorm Sandy, interviews were not conducted here.

Map 4: The three economic corridors identified by Rockaway Development & Revitalization Corporation for interview implementation



Volunteers from the APA-NYM team conducted interviews in three waves, on December 8, 2012, and January 5 and March 30, 2013, with a variety of businesses, including restaurants, grocery and corners stores, hair and nail salons, medical providers, auto and gas, laundry, and others.

Technical Support

The technical support subcommittee provided mapping analysis and other technical support to the entire team. The group assisted other subcommittees in gathering the data required to make strong and accurate recommendations and present information in a visual format.

III. Results

Because housing and transportation needs are long-term issues best addressed as part of a comprehensive planning process, the results section of this report focuses specifically on the business recovery aspect of the APA-NYM's work as the recommendations that flow from this work address immediate needs that are critical elements of building a long-term foundation for recovery. The results section therefore provides a breakdown of key findings from the market analysis and business interviews.

Leakage analysis results

Before the storm, businesses located in Rockaway had the capacity to meet only about 30% of local demand in food and beverages, forcing residents to shop elsewhere. While data is not available to project post-Sandy leakage rates, the high number of businesses closed is likely to further exacerbate this trend in the short-term, adding increased significance to business recovery efforts so that businesses can reopen and hopefully reduce the area's leakage in the long run.

Business interview results

APA-NYM approached and catalogued a total of 297 businesses. Approximately half of the businesses were closed at the time of APA interviewers' visit, even five months after Sandy. This is a crucial variable as it indicates these establishments were still struggling with capacity and resources to be consistently open for business. Of the open businesses, 102 interviews were completed. A key finding common to most businesses was the difficulty taking advantage of available financial relief and other relief because of the complexity of the required paperwork. Business owners did not have a clear understanding of the different roles of each government agency nor of the amount of time they should expect to wait for assistance.

The most pressing need identified by about half of business owners interviewed was financing needed to repair damage to their stores and recover lost inventory. Businesses that agreed to provide financial information identified their losses in the tens of thousands of dollars, at a minimum. Business owners expressed a very strong preference to grants over loans, due to reluctance to take on debt and pay interest. Businesses also expressed that they needed more customers. Many businesses noted that the number of customers had dropped significantly since the storm and attributed it both to residents leaving Rockaway and to a lack of awareness that businesses were open. Some expressed a need for a marketing campaign that would raise awareness about which businesses were open. Businesses in the Rockaway Boulevard area, located near the beach that draws many visitors from outside Rockaway in the summer, were concerned that the lack of transportation and the damage to stores would prevent the return of many critical summer customers. Many businesses across the targeted areas were concerned they would not be able to continue operating if customer levels did not improve.

Additional challenges identified in the interviews included: a lack of support from landlords, especially around the need to cover renovation costs; public health and

safety issues such as mold in buildings and non-working street lights; language barriers preventing access to recovery aid and other services; lack of information about business interruption insurance and property damage insurance; and not receiving insurance payments for damages, generally because most businesses did not have flood insurance.

APA-NYM identified additional challenges, including the interrupted flow of storefronts. Many stores adjacent to each other were not all open, leaving gaps along streetscapes and in access to services. Others experienced relatively superficial renovations that did not properly address issues such as mold; or structural damages. These challenges limited business owners' ability to address long-term resiliency issues and were, compounded by the pressure to reopen as quickly as possible.

IV. Recommendations

Shelter and Housing

The Enterprise grant and loan program provides funds for homes and businesses that incurred loss or damage between October 30, 2012 through March 31, 2013. An organization may receive a grant for up to \$20,000 and a loan of up to \$30,000. RDRC will be exploring this opportunity as well as a relationship with the Center for New York City Neighborhoods (CNYCN) to bolster their foreclosure prevention services.

Transportation

As noted, Far Rockaway is the only station in both the LIRR and Metro North systems that is not part of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's City Ticket program, which offers reduced fares on weekends for trips within New York City limits. The station is not part of the program because the LIRR line travels first into Long Island before returning through New York City. To make transit more accessible to the Far Rockaway community, APA-NYM recommends that the Far Rockaway station be included in the City Ticket program. During times of crisis, City Ticket prices should apply at all times. This would alleviate some of the stress on the shuttle buses that are operating as temporary substitutes for the A train and would reduce travel time. Currently, without traffic, a shuttle bus ride adds 20 minutes to Rockaway residents' commutes.

There is also a significant need for additional bus service in the area. Rockaway would benefit from bus service with stops at Howard Beach and Rockaway Boulevard. Long-term, the option of a bus service that uses the Marine Parkway Bridge and goes to Brooklyn College (end of the 2/3 subway line), should be explored.

Community Board 14, the neighborhood representative body, should continue to be accessed as a resource in Rockaway to address the transportation needs in the area.

Food access and business outreach

Interview results indicate that businesses' principal need is funding and clarity on how to negotiate the various applications for post-Sandy financial aid. In response to this need, APA-NYM's primary recommendation is to establish a mobile unit to provide technical

assistance and support to businesses suffering damage from Superstorm Sandy and applying for assistance. The mobile unit should provide business and recovery materials and loan and grant application information, as well as referrals to services. The Chapter recommends the following steps:

- RDRC apply for discretionary funding from City Council or private foundations and banks to seek capital needed to purchase a vehicle for this purpose.
- RDRC should work with local partners to develop and adopt a marketing and promotional campaign to advertise mobile unit location and existing business services.
- RDRC should establish a hotline to allow businesses quick and easy access to services and information.
- Local, regional, and federal partners should collaborate to form an interagency task force to address the gaps in service and information and provide businesses with resources to prepare for the next large storm, including a business preparedness course.
- Grant funding opportunities should continue to be researched and pursued.

Additional issues raised by RDRC include the need for technical support to ensure systems are backed up and data are safe; a desire to coordinate with the US Department of Environmental Protection and the NYC Department of City Planning on long-term rebuilding, infrastructure, and planning issues; and a desire to determine the status and impact of new FEMA flood maps.

V. Looking Ahead

APA-NYM's long-term plan to assist the Rockaways will be tied into long-term and resiliency planning efforts. APA-NYM is exploring a partnership with APA-National and bringing in an APA Community Planning and Assistance Team (CPAT) to develop long-term economic development strategies and help guide sustainable rebuilding. This partnership would also be an effective way for the APA-NYM to build on comprehensive planning efforts that were underway before Sandy struck, led by a collaborative effort of planning professionals, including private sector planners and Cornell University design studio, led by Bob Balder. This report can help support these and other long-term planning and visioning efforts led by government agencies and professional organizations across the peninsula.

There are a variety of challenges and characteristics unique to the Rockaways that any long-term planning effort should address. There is also a set of specific tools, strategies, and initiatives that the CPAT and other planning efforts should consider in these efforts. Examples include:

- The Rockaways have historically struggled to create strong connections between the peninsula's various neighborhoods and the waterfront. Recapturing the high levels of foot traffic that Rockaway experienced in the 1950s and 1960s before structural disinvestment began has been an ongoing challenge. This is particularly true of high-needs communities on the eastern end of the peninsula,

such as Far Rockaway, where there is little or no connection to the waterfront. The results of this disconnect impact not only Rockaway communities but ultimately affect which businesses chose to open in the area. Leveraging the boardwalk and waterfront as drivers of economic development for the area, in a manner similar to Coney Island and many Long Island shore towns, such as Long Beach, will be an important component of revitalization.

- Because severe storms are unlikely to happen again, a key piece of long-term planning efforts will be ensuring that rebuilding is done with careful planning and proper mitigation of the challenges future storms and other disasters may bring. For example, property owners that have extra ceiling space may elevate their businesses, and properties that need to completely rebuild may be able to mitigate the impact of future storms by including a minimum two-foot crawlspace under the structure.
- New York City has several key zoning and funding mechanisms that Rockaway can tap into to address structural redevelopment issues. The Food Retail Expansion to Support Health program⁵ (FRESH) provides zoning and tax incentives to build or upgrade large grocery stores and supermarkets in underserved areas. The Key Food supermarket in Rockaway recently took advantage of FRESH and is repairing and rebuilding the store to ensure local residents have access to food. Congressional authorization of Community Development Block Grants⁶ (CDBG) will provide additional assistance to help Rockaway and will address housing rehabilitation, business recovery and job creation, infrastructure investments, resiliency initiatives, planning efforts, and more.
- Land use planning will also play an important role in long-term planning effort. An example of long-term influence the community can engage is with the large swath of vacant land in the central section of the peninsula, Arverne, and how to connect this area to the eastern end of the waterfront. While there is a dedicated development plan for the final phase of Arverne, the storm introduced new challenges. The unique topography of the community as a narrow peninsula makes building strong connections between disparate communities challenging, but post-Sandy rebuilding is also an opportunity for stronger planning and cohesion, even in existing development plans.
- There are a variety of land use and planning tools that can play an important role in revitalization efforts. Transfer of Development Rights (TDRs) is a planning tool that can be used in building more resilient communities by incentivizing property owners along commercial strips to raise their properties and build their storefronts higher off the ground by purchasing floor area from adjacent

5 <http://www.nycedc.com/press-release/nycida-approves-assistance-rockaway-supermarket-devastated-hurricane-sandy>

6 <http://www.nyc.gov/html/cdbg/html/about/about.shtml>

residential properties or properties that will not be rebuilt. TDRs should be explored in Zone A communities.

- Finally, sound planning principles and strategies offer the potential for rebuilding more livable and sustainable communities in damaged areas. Encouraging mixed-used development, for example, is an effective strategy the Rockaways should consider as a way to compensate for areas that lose housing units in so-called "no-build" areas.

VI. Lessons Learned

Upon completing its scope of work, the APA-NYM planning team working on the Rockaway recovery effort developed a set of lessons learned to document future considerations for groups doing similar work.

The following lessons are broken down into four sections based on the scope and evolution of the project: A) Project Planning and Management; B) Gathering Information; C) Developing Recommendations; D) Long-Term Planning Efforts.

It is important to note that the New York region never experienced a disaster of the magnitude of Sandy, with extensive damage that devastated the City and beyond. Going into this experience for the first time was an unprecedented and challenging endeavor. These lessons learned are developed within this context and with the intent of strengthening future post-disaster planning efforts in New York City and beyond.

Planning team project planning and management

1. Acknowledge the organizational capacity of the client before defining the scope of work to ensure realistic goals and targets.
2. Understand the capacity and skills of volunteers to ensure roles and tasks are properly assigned.
3. Identify project manager(s) who will clearly define the purpose of the work and determine if immediate relief or longer-term recovery strategies are more needed.
4. Identify the scope of the project-
What is the scale and timeframe and what are the resources needed. This will help set appropriate goals and keep the project progressing.
5. Establish a communications plan. The plan should include methods of communication and frequency of meetings and calls and who on the volunteer team will be the main client contact.

Gathering information

1. Design an interview form/survey that answers the client's questions and provides usable, reliable data to help in making more accurate recommendations.
 - a. APA-NYM revised initial interview questions to yield quantitative results through interviews.
2. Train volunteer interviewers/surveyors to administer the interviews/surveys and

- give them information about the interview/survey goals and how the results and data will be used. This will result in higher quality data.
3. Provide organizational identification to make volunteers more easily identifiable and give them more credibility.
 4. Be sensitive to the unique challenges of interview/survey participants who are trying to put their lives and businesses back together. Doing so is critical to gaining respect in the community and getting more and higher quality information from businesses.
 5. Work with partners to identify funding resources. Work with philanthropic agencies/organizations to facilitate quicker flow of funds to assist with initial damage assessment, cleanup, and repair to fill the gaps until more recovery-focused funding is available. Develop a list of possible sources of funding now for future disasters; list should be regularly updated.

Big Picture (beyond RDRC) Post-Disaster Planning Efforts

1. In a post-disaster planning effort, determine if the goal is to identify immediate relief or longer-term recovery strategies. (See items under project planning).
2. Identify partners and develop a system to track and coordinate efforts. Many groups wanted to help Rockaway businesses and residents, so tracking each organization and their work would avoid duplication of services and confusion among local businesses and residents, such as multiple "needs surveys" in the same neighborhood conducted by different groups, and other issues.
3. Plan now for later—ensure local governments are using federal and state resources to plan for future natural disasters. Engage the public in assisting businesses and organizations in developing individual emergency preparedness plans.
4. A variety of nonprofit organizations exist to serve businesses and residents of communities. Those working to assist communities in post-disaster situations should develop a workplan with goals, objectives, and measurable outcomes to help secure funding to support disaster-related work. Having concrete goals and objectives makes it clear to potential funders what the group aims to accomplish and what the potential impact of their funding may be.

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Community Stakeholders

NAACP Far Rockaway
Habitat for Humanity
Queens Chamber of Commerce
Occupy Sandy

Government Agencies

Queens, Community Board 14
New York City Department of Small Business Services
New York State Department of State
United States Department of Small Business Administration
United States Federal Emergency Management Agency