

# Hurricane Sandy: Initial Relief Efforts

*Report of November 8, 2012*



*Homes destroyed in Breezy Point, New Jersey*

**S**AI DEVOTEES OF THE MID-ATLANTIC Region offered their heartfelt gratitude to their beloved Sri Sathya Sai Baba, for keeping them safe during and after Hurricane Sandy, and also offered their humble support, love, and comfort to the people impacted by the hurricane.

## **Background**

A rare hybrid of a hurricane merged with a powerful storm system in the North Atlantic to create an unprecedented super-storm, named Hurricane Sandy. Initially Hurricane Sandy created havoc in Jamaica, Cuba, and Bermuda, before unleashing its fury onto the Eastern Seaboard of the United States. The main brunt of the storm was felt in Region 2 (Mid-Atlantic

Region) of the USA Sri Sathya Sai Organization. The areas in the path of the storm were the states of Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Connecticut, and parts of Washington DC, New York City, and Long Island.

The storm came up the East Coast on Monday, October 29, 2012, and within 24 hours left devastation and disaster unparalleled in the history of the region. The death toll in the US from the storm reached 106, with thousands of homes damaged, communities ravaged, and estimated recovery costs of tens of billions of dollars.

New Jersey, New York City, and Long Island were among the hardest hit, with storm-packed wind gusts reaching 90 mph, heavy rain, and

ocean storm surges compounded by high tides and a full moon. The wind uprooted thousands of trees, causing power outages in 90% of the communities, as well as major fires. The rain and ocean surge caused flooding in all the major rivers, and the overflow also flooded major tunnels and highways connecting the metropolitan New York area. In preparation for the storm, mandatory evacuations were ordered for low-lying areas; airports, subways, trains and highways were closed, and emergencies were declared in all the states impacted by the storm.

All along the state of New Jersey's 127-mile coastline, the storm affected communities rich and poor; from multimillion-dollar homes in Bay Head and Mantoloking to blue-collar bay front bungalows. Boardwalks were trashed, a roller coaster dumped into the ocean. The worst damage occurred nearest to the ocean, but winds and water wrecked homes several miles inland as well.

The famed New York City subway system was flooded, and several tunnels linking the city to neighboring communities. The community of Breezy Point in the Rockaways was totally wiped out by a raging fire caused by downed power lines and fanned by the high winds.

In the storm's wake, millions of people were left without electrical power and drinking water. Landline phone service was unavailable and mobile phone service was severely disrupted. Lack of power and lack of fuel delivery at gas stations left motorists waiting in line for hours.

Emergency shelters were soon opened, as well as warming centers for people to come and charge their phones and laptops. Food and water was distributed to the thousands left homeless by the storm.

As of November 7, 2012 (nine days after the storm), more than half-a-million people remained without power in the area. Various shelters were still open and food was being distributed. Repairs were going on everywhere, but people were experiencing a growing frustration. To make matters worse, on November 7, another wintry Nor'easter storm, with high winds, rain, and heavy snow caused more power outages and threatened to undo all the hard work and progress that had been achieved.

### **Initial Response**

The Sathya Sai Organization's initial response to the storm began right away, at first by checking on Sai devotees, followed closely thereafter by serving and helping in the community. Some of these efforts are listed below:

- 1.** The Regional Officers contacted all the Center Officers in the region to determine how the local Sai devotees were doing. Most of the centers reported back that the devotees were coping well under the circumstances. The biggest problem was the lack of electricity in people's homes. Power was gradually returning to residences, but the weather was turning cold, and nights were especially difficult. No injuries or widespread damage to property was reported. Despite the difficulties, most of the Sai family were in good spirits and thankful they had not experienced more extensive damage.

- 2.** The Regional Service Coordinator, through an email to the Center Service Coordinators, asked them to be in touch with local devotees and tend to their needs as best as possible. Service Coordinators were also asked to stay in touch with local emergency management

## SAI SERVICE: LOVE IN ACTION



*Food distribution at a shelter in Newark, New Jersey*



*Clothing distribution at Queens College Shelter, Flushing, New York*

authorities so that updates could be provided on a regular basis.

**3.** The Regional Officers began working very closely with the USA National Council President and National Service Coordinator to assist the region with involvement of other USA regions. A proposal was submitted to keep the relief effort moving forward.

**4.** A need was identified for focused communication and efficient handling of service projects. To facilitate this, we designated two people to be points of contact for service being provided on the ground.

**5.** With the help of Sai Young Adults in the impacted region, two locations were identified

where supplies and provisions could be delivered and stored. The initial locations were in devotees' basements and garages while warehouse-type storage space was sought.

**6.** Regular conference calls took place among regional officers and coordinators to provide updates on the current conditions, such as where service was needed, what provisions were required, and who was willing to help. A provisions-on-hand list was created and kept up to date.

**7.** A set of guidelines was created for Sai volunteers, under the watchwords, "Be Safe, Be Practical, and Be Local."

8. Most important, Sai devotees began serving actively in the community – providing food, water, clothing, blankets, smiles, and comfort to those impacted by the storm.

### **Sai Organization Volunteer Efforts**

Volunteer activities that took place initially are listed below:

#### **Queens College Shelter, Flushing, New York**

About 500 residents were housed in this shelter, after being evacuated from homes affected by floods and fire. The shelter was set up by the city of New York, and Sai devotees from NYC helped by providing essential supplies and volunteering regularly.

A “divine moment” occurred when an elderly Afghani woman in the shelter was anxiously and desperately looking for someone who spoke Farsi, a Persian language spoken in Afghanistan. She wanted to convey that her family didn’t know of her well being in the shelter and would be looking for her. When Sai volunteers were approached for assistance, they directed the request to a fellow devotee from Afghanistan who was able to connect heart-to-heart with her; his research resulted in her reunion with family members in New York who indeed were looking for her and unsure of her well being.

#### **American Legion, 209 Cross Bay Blvd, NY**

**(Far Rockaway, Queens)** This location, run by local volunteers, became a hub where donations (food, clothes, supplies, etc.) could be received, sorted, and distributed. The volunteers also cooked and served hot meals. Residents living in the area could come in, take what they needed, and leave.

#### **St Francis de Sales Parish, 219 Beach/129th Street, NY (Far Rockaway, Queens)**

This church was converted into one of the city’s official nonperishable food, blanket, and water distribution locations, staffed with city workers, the National Guard, and local volunteers. The venue is huge, and hundreds of people showed up there daily to receive and sort donations. The depot was overflowing with clothes, blankets, and other supplies that poured in. Residents could come in and take what they needed. Volunteers cooked and served hot meals (outdoors).

#### **Police Precinct, 95 Beach Street, NY (Far Rockaway, Queens)**

This area looked like a war zone. The roads and streets were covered with sand. Many groups were there serving food and water. Some groups also distributed clothes, blankets, and so on. All activities took place outdoors.

#### **25 Beach Street, NY (Far Rockaway, Queens)**

After requesting permission for a location where the Sai Organization could set up and serve hot meals, NYC Councilman James Sanders Jr asked our group to serve this community. The folks here had to walk to Beach/59th Street daily to receive food and water. Soon about 600 meals were being served [daily].

#### **Newark Shelter, North Jersey**

Devotees from New Jersey Sathya Sai Centers together packed more than 1,000 meals of baked ziti, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, bananas, and juice, for distribution at various shelters in northern New Jersey. Sai Center members also worked closely with Newark Central Ward Councilman Darrin Sharif to supply more than 20 trays of pasta to 15 state-run senior care facilities in Newark NJ.

### **Sathya Sai Baba Center of East Brunswick NJ**

The center began collecting various items and delivering them to various shelters in northern and southern New Jersey. Some of the items collected included toiletry items (toothpaste, toothbrushes, soap, etc), nonperishable canned foods, clothing, coats, blankets, and shoes.

### **Lakewood, South Jersey**

Sai volunteers were requested to send pasta to other facilities not run by the state. These facilities had received very little help and were still without electricity. The Sai Center members helped make sandwiches and pack pasta, fruit juice, sandwiches, and fruit into bags, to make the meals easier to distribute. A few Sai devotees visited three different facilities to distribute about 1,000 bags of food.

### **Long Branch, Jersey Shore**

A church from Newark, New Jersey, also requested Sai volunteers to provide pasta for about 100 people in Long Branch, a township on the New Jersey seashore. Soup, bread, pasta, clothing, toothpaste, toothbrushes, socks, soap, and scarves were distributed with the help of the Long Branch Township Police Department. Since only about 40 percent of the town had electricity, everyone enjoyed the hot food and expressed sincere gratitude for the food and supplies.

### **Next Steps**

Sai devotees, as well as relief workers from local/federal government offices and other

organizations, did an admirable job supporting the community through this disaster. The situation was fluid, changing from day to day. It was expected that shelters would be consolidated, that power service would gradually be restored, that roads and tunnels would open up, and that gas shortages would ease.

The Sai groups, recognizing that rapid changes in needs could take place in any given community, expected to transition from a focus on immediate needs (food, shelter, clothing, warmth, etc.) to addressing medium-term needs such as supporting shelters, helping schools and school children get back to normal schedules, and assisting in the rebuilding of small communities.

In summary, the devotees of Region 2 felt grateful to have been kept safe and able to help make a difference in the community. A lot of effort and service with a smile was provided, and much more remained to be done. Sai Organization officers in Region 2 pledged to distribute updates to the USA Sathya Sai Organization as events and needs developed, praying to Sathya Sai to utilize them as his instruments in whatever manner he would deem appropriate.

—USA Region 2

*Human life is God's gift. Make proper use of it by rendering service to society.*

—Sri Sathya Sai Baba (SSS 33:07, April 5, 2000)