

Forgotten

*How the City Has Failed
Sandy Victims in The Rockaways*

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Introduction

In the final days of October (2012), Hurricane Sandy caused billions of dollars in damage to the New York City metro area. The Rockaway peninsula was perhaps the hardest hit, but its recovery has also been the slowest. More than 60 days after the storm made landfall in New York, Rockaway residents continue to struggle to obtain food, clothing, and shelter; their homes have been left moldy, cold and uninhabitable; many more are still without power.

Official assistance has been slow, and residents have encountered insurmountable obstacles to receiving aid from relief agencies. Many non-official organizations, like New York Communities for Change, filled the void in the days after the storm, running relief efforts and delivering supplies. However, completing mass-scale repairs and rebuilding requires local government to improve its performance on Hurricane Sandy-related problems.

Immediate Response

In the aftermath of the hurricane, New York Communities for Change (NYCC) organizers and members mobilized to provide aid to Rockaway residents. They assembled donations of essential items from NYCC members and affiliates in downtown Brooklyn, and directly distributed them in the Rockaways. In the weeks following the storm, in addition to going door-to-door to offer aid, NYCC organizers and volunteers conducted surveys of damage sustained and assistance needed by neighborhood residents.

Twelve hundred fifty-one surveys were collected from residents living in the Rockaways. The results were then used to deliver immediate relief to residents and to determine the long-term rebuilding needs of the peninsula. Not surprisingly, the surveys collected detailed major housing and transportation problems faced by residents.



Two Months Later

After many thought Sandy victims' "immediate needs" of clothes and food—even repairs and shelter—had been addressed, NYCC continued its work in the Rockaways in an effort to determine what had been done, and what still needed to be done.

In the last two weeks of December, NYCC organizers called and visited a sample of the initial survey takers to assess the current habitability situation in the Rockaways, two months after Hurricane Sandy hit. Almost 200 Rockaway residents (a cross-section of the peninsula including homeowners and tenants in various types of housing) were interviewed as part of the updated survey. Despite public plaudits that would suggest otherwise, the results document a clear failure by the Bloomberg administration to solve several problems of habitability, including electricity, heat, wet sheetrock removal, and mold remediation.

- **Almost one-fifth of Rockaway residents surveyed are still not in their homes**
- **Almost 10% are still without electricity**
- **Almost one-third are still without heat**
- **More than four-fifths who had wet sheetrock in their homes still have it there or had to pay out-of-pocket for its removal**
- **Almost two-thirds still have mold or paid out-of-pocket for mold removal and remediation**

Findings & Significance

SURVEY RESULTS (184 SURVEYS / + 89 SURVEYS)	%	TOTAL
Not in Home	18.0%	33
No Electricity	9.3%	17
No Heat	29.0%	53
Still Has Wet Sheetrock	21.9%	40
Removed Wet Sheetrock	35.5%	65
Paid to Remove Wet Sheetrock	25.0%	46
Had Wet Sheetrock & Still Have It	38.1%	
Had Wet Sheetrock & Still Have It/Paid Out-of-Pocket to Remove It	81.9%	
Still Have Mold [†]	37.1%	33
Paid to Have Mold Removed [†]	28.1%	25

A significant number of Rockaway residents have still not returned to their homes. Families have been forced to take extraordinary measures to find shelter by, for example, couch-hopping at homes of friends or relatives across the tri-state area, living with eight people in a studio apartment, and signing leases for other apartments while still paying their mortgages. And for those that have been lucky enough to return home, things are still not back to normal.

Lack of heat and electricity is still a problem. Two months after Sandy, 9 percent of those surveyed still don't have electricity, while an astounding 29 percent are still without heat. As temperatures continue to drop, the lack of heat and electricity is becoming increasingly dangerous. Families trying to live in a house that is colder inside than outside are putting themselves at risk for hypothermia, especially when low temperatures reach the 20s, as they have in the last days of 2012. According to Consumer Reports¹, extremely low temperature can cause several potentially deadly medical conditions, including hypothermia, frostbite, heart attacks, and the flu. Low-income senior citizens, especially, are at increased risk for weather-related sickness and death.

The Mold Crisis

Perhaps the most striking and important finding from the survey is the emerging health and economic crisis deriving from mold in the Rockaways. Of the Rockaway residents surveyed who had wet sheetrock in their homes as a result of the storm, more than 80 percent either still have the wet sheetrock in their homes or paid for its removal out of pocket. Wet sheetrock can cause mold to grow within days if it is not removed immediately.² As a matter of public health policy, the City of New York should have removed the contaminated sheetrock within a week of the storm with a comprehensive remediation policy. Because of its failure to act, mold has been growing in thousands of households on the Rockaway peninsula.

More than 35 percent of residents surveyed still have mold in their homes, and almost 30 percent more have paid for mold remediation out-of-pocket. According to a letter from health professionals released by Public Advocate Bill de Blasio's office:

Mold represents a significant health hazard, particularly for New Yorkers with chronic respiratory problems like asthma and emphysema. Exposure can result in shortness of breath, allergic reaction and severe respiratory distress. In a city where one-in-eight children have asthma, mold can render homes both unhealthy and unsafe.³

Furthermore, with so many people going into their pockets to pay for sheetrock removal and mold remediation, already stretched budgets are breaking and rebuilding is stalling. Because people have lost hours on their jobs in the wake of the storm, people have already depleted their savings and retirement accounts, and have begun to miss mortgage payments. During the survey, people reported paying as much as \$14,000 on mold remediation, and many others reported that they are living with mold because they cannot afford the costs involved with remediation. Those who did pay for mold removal now cannot afford to begin rebuilding their homes so that they can once again become habitable.

Conclusions & Solutions

The mold and habitability crisis in the Rockaways is unfortunately getting worse rather than improving. With each day, even in the cold weather, mold continues to grow, expand, and make people sick. Meanwhile, Rockaway residents are drowning with costs they cannot afford and are not able to rebuild their homes. Fortunately, there is a simple solution.

According to the Office of the Public Advocate, FEMA will not reimburse homeowners for mold remediation; the agency will, however, compensate New York City for costs incurred due to mold. Mayor Bloomberg and New York City should implement a mold and sheetrock removal program immediately that stops the public health crisis and reimburses homeowners for expenses related to mold remediation. It is in the power of the city to take action, but it has refused to do so in a comprehensive, holistic way that would be cost-effective, efficient, and responsible. Instead, the first basic step to rebuilding—removing wet sheetrock and stopping the start and spread of mold—has been left up to the individual homeowners (or renters).

Additionally, the City must implement the "Rapid Repair" program in a similar manner: maximizing efforts of willing contractors, getting "best prices" and getting work done efficiently by working at an economy of scale that is block and neighborhood (even peninsula) wide rather than house by house. Too many residents are still living in cold, moldy, fundamentally unsafe conditions. The Bloomberg administration must immediately alter its approach to recovery so Rockaway residents can start to rebuild.

¹ <http://news.consumerreports.org/health/2010/01/winter-health-risks-how-to-protect-yourself-from-cold-weather-health-hazards-.html>

² <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/03/18/AR2011031805121.html>

³ <http://www.advocate.nyc.gov/mold>