

PROMISING PRACTICES



UCP Suffolk and American Red Cross partnership empowers persons with disabilities to help others

Long before Superstorm Sandy cut a swath of devastation across Long Island, persons with disabilities at [United Cerebral Palsy Association of Greater Suffolk, Inc.](#) (UCP Suffolk), recognized a need for disaster preparedness education among their peers.

The individuals, many of whom use wheelchairs, expressed their desire for training with the local chapter of the American Red Cross. Pleased to accommodate the request, the Red Cross agreed to train the UCP Suffolk group to become disaster volunteers. The group chose the name the American Red Cross Volunteer Support Club at UCP Suffolk, and it is the first and only known disaster preparedness group in the United States composed of persons with disabilities.

A recent [CARF](#) survey report noted with commendation, "On a national level, this is the first volunteer group of persons with disabilities who have successfully completed and developed a training curriculum with and for persons with disabilities. This is an excellent example of utilizing strong community supports to further inclusion in the community for persons with disabilities and assisting persons served to enhance their quality of life by achieving greater participation in their communities."

UCP Suffolk President/CEO Stephen H. Friedman called the distinction "a great accomplishment. We are proud of the participants in our Volunteer Support Club. In partnering with the Red Cross, they furthered their sense of independence

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and inclusion in the community.”

Training raises a challenge

Each person in the program underwent the same background check, orientation, and training that the Red Cross requires of all of its volunteers, and all seventeen individuals successfully completed the requirements.

Karen Gramarossa, the club’s advisor, recalled that the background checks were the most challenging. “Each UCP volunteer had a Social Security number, but many had never had a credit card or bank account in their name. When the background checks were done, some had no recorded information,” she said. “We worked with the Red Cross and UCP volunteers to verify backgrounds.”

Armed with training, the club shares its resources

Empowered by their training in emergency and disaster preparedness, the group members enthusiastically shared their knowledge with other persons with disabilities. They gave presentations at several other organizations serving persons with disabilities, several UCP Suffolk group residences, UCP headquarters, and satellite sites.

Club volunteers assembled Go Bags that are filled with specific items that persons with disabilities may need in an emergency. Tailored to each recipient’s individual needs, Go Bags might include a wheelchair repair kit, adaptable meal equipment, extra batteries for hearing devices, special sanitary supplies, chargers for communications or other assistive devices, emergency contact information for doctors and the pharmacy, lists of medications and allergies, Social Security information, medical insurance cards, and food stamps.

The club extended its reach beyond the initial Go Bags recipients. Using donated items, club volunteers assembled and distributed more than 200 Comfort Kits (containing a razor, shaving cream, shampoo, conditioner, comb, brush, toothbrush, toothpaste, socks, wash cloth, hand towel, deodorant, soap, and hand sanitizer) to veterans in the region. They also put together and gave out more than 50 Kid Kits, which hold a coloring book, crayons, colored pencils, activity book, small games, playing cards, stickers, and a sticker book.

“Activities are important for children and everyone who have been displaced because of a disaster,” Gramarossa added.

Volunteer training is put to the test

The Volunteer Support Club was invited to participate and provide feedback when the Red Cross conducted a mock evacuation drill. Peter, a club volunteer, remembered with pride, "We checked everything out at the shelter and told organizers what would and would not work for someone with a disability."

For example, cots are not usually sturdy enough or at an appropriate height for wheelchair transfers, and extra room is needed around the sleeping area for a person who uses a wheelchair. The Volunteer Support Club volunteers also suggested that people need to be available to open non-automatic doors, directional signs should be large or pictorial, air mattresses and an air pump need to be stocked in sleeping areas, tables for meals should have adjustable heights, and straws need to be available.

"The organizers appreciated our input," Peter added.

Days before Superstorm Sandy came ashore on Long Island, club volunteers gathered at the UCP Suffolk building to share disaster preparedness tips with staff members and persons with disabilities. They explained the Red Cross "Go tapeless" campaign, which maintains that it is safer *not* to tape glass windows and doors before a storm. Handouts were given to individuals who live in group residences to take to staff members and their housemates. Club volunteers answered questions and explained what to pack to prepare for a possible evacuation.

"The club's disaster preparedness education helped us mitigate the storm's emotional impact," Gramarossa said.

Volunteering has its reward

When the American Red Cross of Long Island chapter celebrated its volunteers at an annual Recognition and Awards Breakfast, the Volunteer Support Club received the Good Neighbor Award.

Liz Barker, the chapter's emergency services director, said, "The American Red Cross Volunteer Support Club is made up of members of UCP Suffolk programs who saw a need in their community for outreach and preparedness training. They are wonderful representatives of our Red Cross community."

"We like to give back to the community," said club volunteer Michelle, echoing the feelings of other club members. "It's a good experience to help people, rather than always being the

ones asking for help. It fills us with pride and a sense of independence.”



Above: Persons with disabilities compose the American Red Cross Volunteer Support Club at UCP Suffolk on Long Island, New York. The club's disaster preparedness training was called into action before Superstorm Sandy battered the island.

For more information, contact Christine M. Restani, public relations manager at United Cerebral Palsy Association of Greater Suffolk, Inc., crestani@ucp-suffolk.org or (631) 232-0011, or visit the organization's website at ucp-suffolk.org.

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