

# ONE YEAR OF SANDY RESPONSE



CREDIT: KAREN SMUL

A REPORT BY  
**MAKE THE ROAD NEW YORK**  
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## INTRODUCTION

Hurricane Sandy hit New York on October 29, 2012, flooding tens of thousands of homes, knocking out power and killing dozens. Make the Road New York worked with residents in the hard hit areas of Long Island, including Long Beach and Mastic Beach, and Staten Island, especially Midland Beach, where we opened a new office.

Staten Island is home to New York City's fastest growing Mexican community. Thirty percent of that borough's residents speak a language other than English at home, according to the US Census. The immigrant population of Long Island is also growing rapidly: In Nassau County, 28 percent of residents speak a language other than English at home.

Working class immigrant communities were particularly devastated by Sandy. Lack of multilingual staff at official relief sites meant that early help was inaccessible to those with limited English. Citizenship status limited some immigrants' ability to claim benefits like FEMA aid. A year after the storm, many continue to struggle to find new jobs and homes.

Make the Road New York continues to work on multiple fronts, providing legal assistance, training workers for new jobs and organizing for more just rebuilding policies. We have connected 2,000 families to aid, provided legal services to more than 400 families and – in partnership with the Asbestos Lead and Hazardous Waste Laborers' Local 78 – designed and launched a new mold remediation program that creates good jobs for immigrant workers, to name a few highlights. But much remains to be done.

In 2014, we will continue to advance our vision for a just rebuilding. We will advocate for policies to assist renters, both documented and undocumented. We will organize at the grassroots to ensure that newly rebuilt neighborhoods are affordable to working families. Our lawyers will continue to defend the most vulnerable Sandy survivors: exploited day laborers, low-income homeowners and displaced immigrant families.

We thank our funders for their generous support of our Sandy work: AARP Foundation, Alliance for a Just Rebuilding/ALIGN, Alliance for a Just Society, Center for Disaster Philanthropy, Cricket Island Foundation, Durst Family Foundation, Edouard Foundation, EILEEN FISHER, Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies, Ford Foundation, Freddie Mac Community Relations Donor Assisted Fund, Edward W. Hazen Foundation, JPB Foundation, Long Island Community Foundation, Mary J. Hutchins Foundation, Marty Tomberg Charitable Fund, Mertz Gilmore Foundation, MoveOn.org members, New York Bar Foundation, New York Foundation, New York Women's Foundation, North Star Fund, Robin Hood Foundation, Surdna Foundation and hundreds of individual MRNY donors.

## OUTREACH

Immediately after the storm, Make the Road New York (MRNY) repurposed our Staten Island and Long Island offices as warming centers, information hotspots, and donation and distribution centers. Our staff stayed late and came in on weekends to accommodate hundreds of families looking for help.

This was especially crucial in Long Island: A Nor'easter hit the island only a week after Sandy, and the Long Island Power Authority (LIPA) didn't fully restore power for weeks. In the first weeks, we provided more than 250 immigrant Long Islanders with hot meals and necessities like cleaning supplies and warm clothing.



*“At first, I didn’t think we were eligible for FEMA aid. Plus I thought it was a loan that I would have to pay back. The outreach worker from Make the Road New York explained that we were eligible because my children have their citizenship papers and that it was not a loan.”*

- Priscilla

Within days, ten bilingual MRNY canvassers were on the ground in Long Island and Staten Island assessing needs and distributing accurate information in Spanish and English. Misinformation had already begun to spread: Many hard-hit immigrant families wrongly believed they were ineligible for federal FEMA relief. FEMA workers were often similarly misinformed. (Any household with one US citizen of any age qualified – even if other members were undocumented.)

In Long Island, we produced bilingual information packets about Sandy aid, emergency shelter and survivors' rights. We tailored the information to the concerns of immigrants, and joined forces with other organizations in Long Island Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster, a coalition of organizations and government agencies active in recovery to get them out across the island. Since the presidential election was a week after the storm, our voter registration and education canvassers redoubled their efforts, connecting storm victims to their new polling sites and providing them with rides and additional assistance to ensure they could exercise their right to vote.

The results of this immediate work – including our first intensive survey of 416 Staten Island and Long Island immigrants – were documented in our December 2012 report, *Unmet Needs: Superstorm Sandy and Immigrant Communities in the Metro New York Area*. We found 40 percent of surveyed families were displaced from their homes. Only 22 percent applied for relief, citing lack of knowledge about the application process as the primary reason. And even then, one in three damaged homes already suffered visible mold contamination, boding a serious public health problem.



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This report highlighted the unique needs of Sandy-affected immigrants and encouraged the New York City Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs

to launch in-depth outreach to immigrants. MRNY anchored this effort in Staten Island, reaching 1,600 more families and connecting them to our services, our Sandy organizing committee and other recovery resources.

**Make the Road New York surveyed 2,000 impacted families and connected them to aid.**

## DIRECT ASSISTANCE

*“We were living in the first floor unit of a two family house. The water came up sixteen inches in our apartment. We lost everything, all our furniture, everything. We lost probably \$10,000 worth of personal property. We didn’t have renter’s flood insurance. At first, FEMA denied us rental assistance. Even though we were living in a legal two family house, they automatically denied our application because there were multiple applications from the same address. With the help of Make the Road New York, we were able to get FEMA to reconsider our application.”*

- Bill

Throughout fall and early winter, we connected families to food, shelter and cash assistance. With support from an anonymous donor, MRNY developed a grant program that distributed \$19,000 among eight Long Island families for emergency rental assistance and \$33,600 among 56 Staten Island families for other urgent needs. Many of these families were ineligible for aid from official sources. Additionally, we connected 44 families to \$600 cash assistance grants distributed by the Tzu Chi Foundation.

We worked with the New York City Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs to distribute 120 new mattresses to families who could not afford new ones. Finally, we helped collect donations of household items like kitchen utensils and furniture, delivering them to dozens of survivors.



**Carmen\***, originally from Colombia, lost her job as a housekeeper in Oceanside, Long Island when her employer’s home was damaged by Sandy. Unable to afford her rent, she and her two teenage daughters moved out. They were unable to find affordable accommodations for the entire family. Carmen stayed in a room in the home of a former employer while her daughters rented rooms with friends. With the help of Make the Road New York’s grant program, Carmen was able to reunite with her daughters in a new apartment.

\*not her real name

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MRNY staff were recently trained to present cases at the New York Disaster Interfaith Services Unmet Needs Roundtable, which convened in summer 2013 to help Sandy survivors, including undocumented immigrants. This means that our clients and members now have access to NYDIS's emergency aid, including assistance with rent and electricity bills.

**MAKE THE ROAD NEW YORK HAS:**

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- Surveyed 2,000 families and connected them to aid.
- Distributed \$79,000 in cash grants to 108 families.
- Provided meals to hundreds of families.
- Delivered new mattresses to 120 families.

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## LEGAL SUPPORT FOR SURVIVORS

In the year following Sandy, MRNY provided legal advice and representation to 402 families who could not afford lawyers. We helped them submit FEMA assistance applications and claim disaster unemployment insurance. We assisted them in challenging improperly denied insurance claims, getting money back from unscrupulous contractors and negotiating payments with mortgage companies. We supported renters in securing repairs and claiming security deposits. We also represented Sandy-affected renters in housing court to prevent evictions and obtain rent abatements.

**Make the Road New York has provided direct legal assistance to 402 families.**

We have won important victories in all these areas, from obtaining unemployment benefits for a man who was living in a homeless shelter with his two children to securing a loan modification for a homeowner who was struggling to fix her home and couldn't afford to pay her mortgage. Other highlights include:

- Winning dismissal of a non-payment case on behalf of a Section 8 tenant who withheld rent after her landlord refused to make repairs.
- Securing a rent abatement for a tenant living with toxic mold.
- Forcing return of a security deposit for a tenant who could not return to her flooded apartment after the storm.
- Winning a claim for a homeowner who was the victim of contractor fraud.

Beginning in November 2012, we held a series of 57 legal clinics in Long Island and Staten Island that connected hundreds of survivors to FEMA aid, supplemental food stamps, disaster unemployment assistance, and help with filing insurance claims.

**Ernesto\*, a young Peruvian construction worker, lived with his wife and two small children in a basement apartment in Copiague, Long Island. The storm severely damaged the apartment, forcing Ernesto and his family to stay in a motel. The landlord sued Ernesto for \$3,000, falsely claiming he was responsible for the damages. MRNY defended Ernesto against the landlord in small claims court and won.**

\*not his real name

MRNY has also persistently advocated for Sandy victims who have been unfairly denied benefits or who have faced barriers to obtaining much-needed assistance. In particular, we have helped low-income Sandy survivors access FEMA aid, pushed for fair and equal distribution of housing assistance, and the extension of all forms of Sandy assistance to the thousands of undocumented residents affected by Sandy.

## JOBS

Sandy wiped out 30,000 jobs in the New York City area. Low-wage workers often lack unemployment insurance and other protections and were therefore particularly hard hit. In the winter and spring, employers in hospitality, leisure and other sectors began to reopen their doors. But low-wage workers in impacted neighborhoods – child care providers and workers in local businesses, among others – continued to languish. Some workers took temporary jobs in demolition and rebuilding work that were dangerous and poorly paid.

### KEEPING REBUILDING WORKERS SAFE

To address the concerns of immigrant day laborers, MRNY partnered with Queens College to design an innovative program targeted to Sandy workers. From March through October, we conducted 23 trainings in Spanish for 518 workers on workplace rights and safety. Topics ranged from identifying lead and asbestos, to operating in confined spaces, to filing complaints about workers' rights violations. All trainees received free personal protective equipment, including professionally fitted respirators, and a short exam by a medical professional.



***"For three months, I worked between 10 and 15 hours a day cleaning schools, libraries, hospitals, banks and homes. This contractor didn't have licenses for the work we were doing - removing mold and asbestos - and we were never given adequate safety equipment. We were paid \$10 per hour for all the hours we worked. We were not paid overtime as required by law. Our boss told us that we shouldn't complain because it was more than minimum wage.***

***After participating in MRNY's Sandy Response Occupational Safety and Personal Protective Equipment training, I found out that this company is committing wage theft. So I became vocal. My employer relocated me to less dangerous jobs and tried to stop me from talking with my companion workers. But nothing's going to turn me back now!"***

**- Diana**

In addition, MRNY hosted three OSHA trainings for Sandy workers in our Brooklyn, Staten Island and Long Island offices, and referred other workers to trainings held by partner organizations. In total, 100 workers learned about safety and protecting their rights through these OSHA trainings.

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## CONNECTING UNEMPLOYED WORKERS TO JOBS

We created an integrated program focused on the post-Sandy workforce that draws on our extensive experience with job training, placement and retention. To date, we have worked one-on-one with more than 400 Sandy-affected individuals to draft resumes and cover letters, prepare for interviews and develop a personalized job hunt strategy. Our participants have secured jobs in industries from domestic labor to education to disaster case management.



**Flor, originally from Mexico, has lived in Staten Island with her family for 17 years. She cleaned houses to support her three children and pay their \$1,100 monthly rent. Sandy destroyed her house, as well as the houses of her employers, leaving her without work and without a home. Her new place, which Flor shares with six other family members, costs \$1,600 a month - a steep \$500 increase. MRNY workforce specialists helped Flor find cleaning work with a new employer, which is helping her pay the rent.**

One highlight is our partnerships with Laborers' Locals 1010 and 78 which are giving neighborhood workers access to good reconstruction jobs. With Local 78, we created an innovative initiative to train community members in mold remediation, give them temporary union membership and access to union jobs in Sandy worksites. With Local 1010, we created a pipeline for community residents to join the union as full members and receive intensive training and access to rebuilding jobs. We plan to continue this pipeline beyond Sandy work. We have also developed relationships with contractors doing Sandy rebuilding and are poised to place many workers in jobs once the federally funded Build it Back program is fully underway.

**Make the Road New York provided safety equipment and training to over 500 day laborers working on rebuilding.**

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## SAFE & AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Make the Road New York is pushing back against skyrocketing rents and deteriorating housing conditions. This is a high stakes fight. If we lose, immigrants and working families will be permanently displaced from their neighborhoods. Our legal team helps low-income homeowners negotiate with mortgage lenders, reclaim payments from unscrupulous contractors and get what they deserve from insurance companies and government agencies. Our organizers push the City to channel resources to eradicating mold from thousands of Sandy-damaged homes. We are working hard to ensure that renters can afford to stay in their own communities.



## PROTECTING RENTERS

Sandy-affected renters, who are more likely to be low-income and of color, have mostly fallen through the cracks of the recovery effort. There is little official data on renters' needs, and public rebuilding programs are geared towards homeowners.

To fill the information gap, MRNY conducted a third in-depth study of post-Sandy realities. We surveyed more than 450 renters and worked with allies to reach another 100 in the impacted areas of Brooklyn and Queens.

We found that one year later, most are still struggling to find safe affordable homes and have very little access to government support. Some are being charged exorbitant rent increases for smaller spaces that have much worse conditions. This is partly because landlords can get away with charging more in a tighter market, and partly because landlords are passing costs of repairs on to tenants.

Other renters were unable to recover security deposits they were entitled to or continued to pay rent for damaged homes while living elsewhere. Still others are living in cars or squeezing onto the couches of family and friends.



CREDIT KAREN SMUL

**Maria Raquel Sanchez, an undocumented immigrant from Mexico, has lived in Staten Island for 24 years. After the storm, she and her family - which includes a total of four adults, a baby and her five-year-old grandson, Richie - moved to a new apartment in the same neighborhood. Their new house is a smaller two bedroom bungalow and the rent is \$500 higher. The crowding and financial strain is taking its toll: Maria wants to stay in Midland Beach but fears that tensions will soon force her to a new neighborhood, or even to return to her home country.**

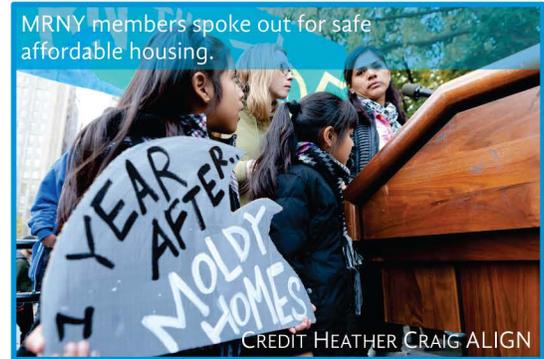
MRNY responded by providing case management and direct legal representation, as well as involving families in collective organizing to improve public policies and push for improvements in the services that are available to them. We helped dozens of individual renters to apply for rent subsidies through the City's Build it Back program – a valuable resource that was inadequately publicized to renters and not easily accessible to Spanish speakers. We continue to take every opportunity to elevate renters' needs in the eyes of the public, the press and elected officials.

Our goal: Ensure that newly rebuilt neighborhoods are accessible to working and poor New Yorkers. Over the medium term, we are organizing for expanded resources for temporary Sandy rental vouchers, a privately-funded voucher program for undocumented immigrants, strong enforcement of laws prohibiting discrimination against tenants who pay rent with vouchers, and other mechanisms to ensure that renters are able to return to – and remain in – their own neighborhoods.



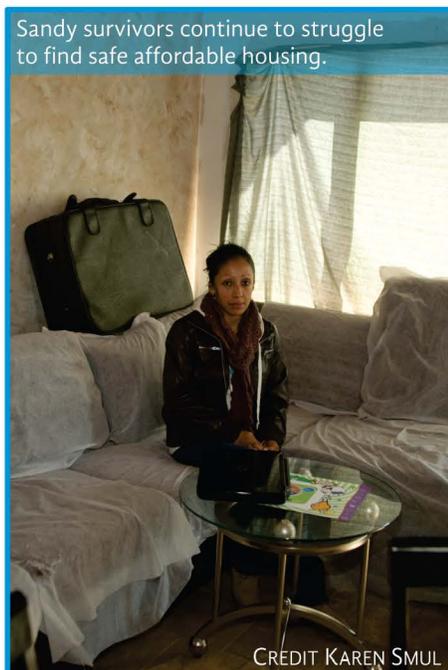
## GETTING RID OF MOLD

Sandy flooded 70,000 homes in New York City. Mold – a trigger of asthma and other health problems – infested many of them. Yet mold remediation is not covered by most insurance. Nor was it incorporated into the City’s Rapid Repairs program for Sandy-damaged homes. In the storm’s aftermath, there was widespread misinformation about mold, and many homeowners who attempted to clean mold themselves used ineffective methods. Unscrupulous contractors, as well as untrained or under-equipped volunteers, also performed unsuccessful remediations.



With allies, MRNY made this crisis visible to the public and to elected officials. We gathered new data, organized a “mold tour” for reporters and kept the issue in the public eye. The City responded by improving its existing mold remediation program: It expanded hotline hours and allowed renters to start the registration process. (Previously only owners were able to register.)

With the Alliance for a Just Rebuilding, a coalition that MRNY helped to launch that is now coordinated by ALIGN, we reached out to nearly 700 New Yorkers from February through May, to inform them about the program and encourage them to sign up. The results of our outreach are reflected in the report, *Sandy’s Mold Legacy*. While 61 percent of people surveyed reported visible mold at the time of the survey, only 20 percent knew about the City’s remediation program. Ninety percent of homeowners who attempted their own remediation were unsuccessful.



**When one of our immigrant outreach workers met Veronica in May, she was living with her husband and two young children in a mold-infested rental home. MRNY helped her register her home for the City’s mold remediation program – even though she is a renter. (Initially the City had only permitted owners to start the registration process. Thanks to MRNY’s advocacy, renters are now allowed to register on their own.) The City contacted her landlord, and the mold was successfully remediated.**

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We also designed a unique public-private partnership, Back Home, Back to Work, which remediates mold and provides training in mold remediation to local job seekers. We provided an accredited 16-hour mold remediation training for 19 community members who were then hired by union contractors. We are partnering with Laborers Local 78 and contractors on this program.

#### KEY FINDINGS OF MRNY'S MOLD SURVEY:

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- Nearly two of every three respondents had visible mold at the time of the survey.
- Only 20 percent of respondents knew about the City's mold remediation program.
- The vast majority – over 90 percent – of respondents who attempted their own mold remediation saw mold grow back.

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## GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING & COALITION BUILDING

For the rebuilding to be fair, it must be informed by the experiences of poor and working class Sandy survivors. We are organizing to elevate their ideas and experiences to the public and government decision makers.

Our grassroots Sandy committee meets weekly for “know your rights” trainings, campaign planning and sharing of personal stories. The group has identified pressing issues, such as exorbitant rent increases and exclusion of undocumented people from relief programs, and developed policy proposals to address them. The group regularly raises issues and proposals with reporters and elected officials, including staff from the New York City Department of Housing, Preservation and Development (HPD); the Office of Housing Recovery, and the offices of New York City Council Speaker Quinn, Assemblywoman Malliotakis, Congressman Grimm, State Senator Savino and Mayor-elect de Blasio, among others.

MRNY has also joined forces with a set of diverse organizations to form the Alliance for a Just Rebuilding, which is working to ensure that the billions of Sandy rebuilding dollars are used in the service of the most vulnerable survivors. The coalition has developed a model policy to help ensure that New York’s Sandy rebuilding money is spent justly. It has successfully pushed the City to implement a mold remediation program, extend the registration deadline for the Build It Back program, secured commitments from mayoral candidates to support our proposals, and conducted a neighborhood tour with then-candidate Mayor-elect Bill de Blasio.

MRNY is also helping to anchor the Staten Island Long Term Recovery Organization, which was formed by clergy and service providers. This coalition – which facilitates the sharing of resources – has helped us amplify our impact by referring residents to our legal staff, and providing us with warehouse space and free delivery services to distribute mattresses to survivors.

Currently MRNY is coordinating with both coalitions to outreach to Staten Islanders – especially renters, immigrants and non-English speakers – who missed the registration deadline for the City’s Build it Back program. Together, we are advocating for further extension of the deadline, inclusion of undocumented immigrants in the program and increased outreach to vulnerable populations.



## TIMELINE

MRNY's committee regularly organizes public actions to highlight the needs of working families in Sandy-affected communities:

### MAY 7 - MOLD TOUR:

MRNY members showed then-candidate Bill de Blasio mold damaged homes, discussed mold-related health problems and released findings of the mold report, published with the Alliance for a Just Rebuilding.



### JUNE 13 - CANDIDATE FORUM:

Members attended a mayoral candidate forum co-hosted by the Alliance for a Just Rebuilding and Faith in New York. MRNY members pressed candidates on their solutions to the affordable housing crisis.



### JULY 31 - PRESS CONFERENCE AT THE FERRY:

Renters experienced average rent increases of \$188 post-Sandy, according to MRNY's preliminary rent survey. Members carried groceries representing the food they could not buy as a result of the rent increases.



### JULY 31 - SANDY SIX-MONTH ANNIVERSARY EVENT:

MRNY members marched to City Hall to remind the candidates of the growing needs in affected areas – including the need for good rebuilding jobs.



**SEPTEMBER 29 - CANDIDATE TOUR:**

MRNY members asked then-mayoral candidate Bill de Blasio to endorse a platform for equitable rebuilding.



**OCTOBER 27 - SANDY SOJOURN:**

To mark continued unemployment and housing problems at the storm's one year anniversary, dozens of members walked through the most affected areas of Staten Island.



**OCTOBER 27 - SANDY ANNIVERSARY TURN THE TIDE EVENT:**

Ninety MRNY members joined with hundreds of allies across the City to highlight the "Tale of Two Recoveries." Lulu Vasquez drew cheers from the crowd when she described working 60 hours a week to afford the increase in rent on her home that doesn't even have hot water.



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## IN CONCLUSION

We could not have accomplished this work without the generosity of our funders. And still, so much remains to be done. Among the biggest tasks: ensuring that newly rebuilt neighborhoods are affordable to the working class and low-income people who call them home. Our current plans include maintaining a fully staffed program in Staten Island to provide ongoing legal support, case management, outreach and organizing and advocacy for at least another two years. We hope you will stay with us in this effort.

