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New York Property Managers Devise Survival Plans for the Next Disaster

By Julie Satow

In the hectic days that followed Hurricane Sandy, the only place that John Ambrosini could find cell service was on a hill near his home on the North Shore of Long Island.

There he would sit, his phone plugged into the car lighter — the only available source of electricity — and run operations overseeing some 60 Manhattan office buildings, many of which were without power and inundated by corroding floodwaters.

“Sandy took us all by surprise; we were really unprepared,” said Mr. Ambrosini, the head of property management at ABS Partners Real Estate, which manages some seven million square feet in New York. “There was no food, no ability to shelter in place, no traffic lights. And there I was stuck at home, trying to coordinate getting contractors, electricians and plumbers in and out of the buildings to pump the basements and get the systems up and running again.”

As the mayhem receded, Mr. Ambrosini began to rethink his preparedness for future disasters. In particular, he wanted to make sure that those whose job it was to run the buildings during a disaster were outfitted with sufficient food and protection to do their tasks effectively.

The result is a 21-piece survival kit that ABS has begun installing in many of its buildings, including 44 Wall Street in the financial district and 210 11th Avenue in Chelsea, which were particularly hard-hit by flood damage.

The kits include gallons of distilled drinking water, which has a longer shelf life than typical bottled water; military-grade food rations that have high caloric value if not much taste; and rubber suits to protect underclothes. Depending on how many people need them, these survival kits can cost \$4,500 to nearly \$7,000 apiece.

“All of the material is of the best quality. It is stuff that is durable and won’t just be useful during a storm but can be reused for the next disaster,” said Steven Mark Palladino, the president of SMP Supply Corporation, which provided all of the items in the ABS Partners kits.

Mr. Palladino, who is 21 and in his final semester of college at the State University of New York Maritime College, is also a member of the Air National Guard, where he serves as an Air Force emergency manager. “Being in the military, I know what it is like to sleep in a pile of mud and not have any assistance,” Mr. Palladino said. He used that background to guide decisions on what to put inside the kits.

A priority was hygiene, and he outfitted the kits with miniature toothbrushes and toothpaste, shampoo, razors and shaving cream. “It is very easy to get sick when you are surrounded by so much nastiness, sitting in your own sweat or freezing cold,” Mr. Palladino said. The kits also include enough clothes to last several days, emergency cots, heavy-duty work gloves, a multiuse tool, batteries, a first aid kit, flashlights, battery-powered radios, sump pumps, boots, a generator, bleach, five-gallon gas drums, duct tape and even a closet with a lock.

ABS Partners was not the only management company that revised disaster preparedness after Sandy. For Ken Walsh Jr., the director of operations at Adams & Company, which manages 33 Manhattan office buildings, the realization came when his men were stuck living without electricity for a week. “We always kept a go-bag, but it had just enough equipment to last a few days. No one expected they would need it for a week.”



In a lesson learned from Hurricane Sandy, buildings are being stocked with emergency supplies.

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After the storm, Adams & Company requested that its building managers expand their go-bags to include glow sticks that could be cracked and used to light stairwells, blankets, extra clothes and a lot of drinking water.

Joe Toledo, who works for Adams, manages a staff of nine at 53 West 23rd Street, a complex of three buildings between Fifth and Sixth Avenues. During the storm, “there was no electricity at all and my guys were using pails to take the water out of the basement and dump it in the street,” he said. “We ran out of things and stuff stopped working, like batteries. You don’t think about how dark a basement gets when there aren’t lights.”

Mr. Toledo has since filled his go-bag with, among other things, a week’s supply of canned food like tuna fish and soup, wash cloths, socks and a hand-cranked radio with flashlight. The building complex has also installed a 5,500-watt portable generator.

Residential buildings are also improving their plans for the next disaster. Halstead Management Company, which oversees 174 residential condominiums, cooperatives and rentals in New York, has created a workbook for its buildings’ staff. The 31-page workbook, which includes checklists and procedures to follow, was the result of an internal task force that spent five months researching the project.

“We contacted sources like the Coast Guard and the New York City Office of Emergency Management to figure out what was needed,” said Paul Gottsegen, the president of Halstead, which had 42 buildings without power and six buildings that flooded during Sandy.

The task force’s resulting requirements are less comprehensive than the survival kits some of the large office buildings are employing. “We found that you can be prepared with the basics for about \$1,500,” Mr. Gottsegen said. Among the items the company requires are face masks, goggles, markers and poster board for making signs, plywood sheets, buckets, shovels and inflatable mattresses.

There are also some homegrown attempts to put in place emergency systems around New York. Lili Gross Barasch, a real estate broker at Stribling and the vice president of the co-op board at 135 East 71st Street, is part of the Community Coalition for Emergency Preparedness, a local nonprofit organization.

The group hopes to create clusters of five to 10 apartment buildings that are near one another and can cooperate in case of an emergency. While goals are not final, the group may collect residents’ emergency contact information, stockpile supplies and train some residents to help in an emergency. So far, two clusters have formed — one around Carnegie Hill and another around 72nd Street, Ms. Barasch said.

Whatever the strategy, vigilance and self-reliance are critical. “People think of this storm as once in a century, but climate change means that these storms are going to be more frequent,” Mr. Ambrosini said. “New York has this wonderful waterfront, but we are also extremely vulnerable and the real estate industry has to be thinking of how it can protect itself.”

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