

Doubt Lingers for New Yorkers Devastated by Hurricane Sandy

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NEW YORK – Edith Harris was cornered in her living room, inside her brick house, deep in Canarsie, Brooklyn. Volunteers in green t-shirts swarmed around her. They banged away at new appliances in the bathrooms, studied the interior supports that held up her fragile basement walls. They scurried past one another in the narrow hallway while Harris applied a fresh coat of maroon lipstick and pink eye shadow, looking back and forth from her pocket mirror to the daytime shows that flashed on the mounted television. Outside her home, more volunteers — eager, young people visiting from distant parts of New York City — tilled fresh soil and planted bright purple and yellow flowers in the front yard. Eighteen months have passed since Superstorm Sandy hit New York on October 29, 2012 and surprised neighborhoods like Canarsie with intense, sudden flooding and long-lasting damage. The shock gradually subsided — for most people — as the waters receded and the power was turned back on for the nearly million New Yorkers who were initially left without electricity. But the effects of the storm still penetrate deeply for the thousands of New Yorkers who are struggling to reconstruct or fix their homes and move on with their lives. Harris, a 57-year-old single mother, originally from Jamaica, struggles to speak about Sandy. She became emotional as she spoke of her reaction to the quiet following the storm. “We went outside and saw trees uprooted, like something out of a movie,” said Harris. “I thought it was a joke. We were not told to expect flooding. We did not realize what would happen, and when the water came in, up to the first floor, we did not know what organizations to reach out to for help.” There was a surge of ad-hoc community organization in places like the Rockaways and Queens when Sandy reached New York and New Jersey. At the time former organizers of Occupy Wall Street were scattered and weakened after their forced removal from Zuccotti Park. They found a revitalized purpose with Sandy and were some of the first responders on the scene, coordinating with local residents to distribute food, water and clothing. Blocks away from washed out Rockaway Beach, people waited impatiently outside the impromptu Sandy relief aid office manned by former Occupy protestors, now under the loose umbrella of Occupy Sandy. Residents came back for seconds and thirds on extra clothing and water and rumors

began to circulate about some people selling the free distributed goods on the street. A family of immigrants from Central America combed through the still-smoking remains of buildings that burned down following an electrical fire, searching for salvaged possessions. All of their money and personal documents, they said, were stored in their basement apartment. In the Far Rockaways — where in 2011 about 27 percent of the population fell below the poverty level, far above the New York City average of 16 percent — public housing residents ate soup outdoors and gossiped about reports of grocery store looting. One woman in the Rockaways asked a reporter on that cold October evening, “Where’s FEMA? Where’s the Red Cross? I don’t see anybody here.” The question would reverberate across the city for more than a year and half. In 2013 New York City received a total of \$3.22 billion in federal grants for Sandy disaster relief and rebuilding. About \$650 million of that money was designated for a program called NYC Build it Back, which former Mayor Mike Bloomberg announced in June 2013. The program is intended to help all residents who owned property at the time of the storm. Build it Back prioritizes low- and middle-income New Yorkers — meaning individuals who earn less than \$48,100, or a four-person household that pulls in \$68,700 annually. But Build it Back has been a phantom presence, so far, in all damaged Sandy areas. It is drawing the ire of residents and of politicians alike, including New York City Comptroller Scott Stringer, who announced in April that his office is launching an official audit of the city program. “Superstorm Sandy changed the lives of millions of New Yorkers and we are still grappling with its consequences today,” Stringer said in a media release. “It is critical to have an accounting of how government has responded to this event, and what we can do to better prepare for the future.” A first-of-its-kind auditing agency in New York, the Sandy Oversight Unit, as it is known, will review how federal aid was spent on recovery and resiliency programs and monitor the budget and progression of Sandy projects. Stringer is also hosting town hall meetings in different affected neighborhoods in May and June to speak with residents about their experiences and concerns following the storm. To date, Build it Back has dispensed about \$1 million in construction funding, according to Amy Peterson, appointed in March by Mayor Bill de Blasio to head the rebuilding and repair agency and to replace the former Build it Back chief who stepped down this spring after less than a year of leadership. The new mayor has called progress on Build it Back, which has conducted 13,826 application intake meetings and completed 578 applications, “a profound problem.” De Blasio plans to increase support for the initiative and has pledged to start construction on a minimum of 500 homes this summer. Stringer said during an April visit to the Rockaways that it disturbs him “greatly” that there are 20,000 people on a waiting list for Build it Back and only six homes have been rebuilt with money from the program. “This has gone on way too long,” he was quoted as saying. Organizations that have been observing and helping New Yorkers navigate the process of seeking recovery aid through a city program like Build it Back also remain unconvinced of the

De Blasio administration's public commitment to change."The uncertainty is a huge obstacle on a path to recovery," said Terri Bennett, the co-director of Respond and Rebuild, a grassroots organization that formed out of Occupy Sandy Recovery. "A lot of people are waiting on Build it Back and they have lost hope in it. If you have no other options, there is nothing you can do but wait. It has been a long time and people have grown really frustrated."Low-income homeowners and renters are eligible to receive assistance from Build it Back, one of the two main Sandy relief routes established by New York City and backed by federal funds. But the new initiative is not a feasible option for the approximate 80,000 public housing residents of the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) whose apartments in 400 buildings were left without electricity in the wake of the storm. Thirty-four percent of NYCHA residents surveyed in a March 2014 report that they had visible mold in their apartment after Sandy. Thirty-four percent of that group said that NYCHA cleaned up the mold poorly and another 38 percent said that NYCHA had done nothing. A reported 56 percent of residents with reported mold said that it negatively affected their health, according to the survey of more than 600 residents, conducted by a coalition of community organizations in the city.Rosanna Cruz oversees disaster case managers at the New York-based social service agency Good Shepherd Services. The agency is now handling 61 active Sandy cases — a mix of homeowners and NYCHA residents, marking two very distinct populations, according to Cruz. Homeowners are unused to asking for help, she says, for example. They have so far had one client who is a homeowner and who has gone through one of the final assessment steps with Build it Back that comes before construction teams enter the home to begin work. He is an 85-year-old man who lives in Red Hook.Good Shepherd has NYCHA residents who have yet to receive attention and assistance from the public housing authority regarding storm damage. They join the 40 percent of the residents polled who said they had new repairs as a result of Sandy, and the 62 percent who were told they would have to wait six months or more to receive repairs, according to the March 2014 report, "Weathering the Storm." But about 55 percent of those survey respondents already had repair needs before the storm, the survey cites."FEMA gives NYCHA money for repairs, but a lot of the other agencies are not allowed to go in to NYCHA residences and help and that makes it hard for these clients to receive assistance. Basically we have been referring them to legal services in these cases, when they are not receiving assistance from NYCHA," Cruz said. "And we go in the order of clients who have major problems, [from] people who are handicapped to the elderly, to take care of first."NYCHA, Cruz and her disaster cases managers maintain, is not structurally prepared to work with situations like Sandy."It [NYCHA] is treating Sandy damage like any other repair issue, asking NYCHA residents to call its regular customer service line and then people just get a basic recording like they always would," Cruz said. "But with Sandy repairs, they were supposed to have handled that differently and separately. That has been one of the main

issues.” Undocumented immigrants who were impacted by Sandy have fallen even farther outside of the scope of any relief work. Non-citizen immigrants who were renting in the Rockaways before the storm often did so with hand-shake lease agreements, lacking any sort of formal contract. Some people also lived in situations that were outside of the city’s housing code, like in basement rooms that had bathrooms and kitchens attached. These casual renters and immigrants by and large cleared out after Sandy, without exploring any chance of emergency relief or longer-term support. In community Sandy relief circles, a discussion has surfaced regarding how to handle the problem of immigrant Sandy victims — those without proof of residence or citizenship. So far, a clear answer has not emerged, and the work of community organizations continues to categorically exclude this population, undoubtedly affected in equally devastating proportions. In Canarsie, national non-profit organizations like Rebuilding Together are focusing on low-income homeowners like Edith Harris, who is altogether unaware of Build it Back. She, too, is looking to Rebuilding ? to come in and fix the damage and to address outstanding vulnerabilities in her home. The construction work required totals nearly \$70,000, according to a contractor overseeing the volunteers at her house. Harris’ neighbor, Delrose Archer, is trying to navigate different application systems and to receive public aid to help strengthen the weakened foundation of her home. She is simultaneously counting on the numerous national and local organizations like Rebuilding Together that continue to provide the fastest and most straightforward source of long-term Sandy rebuilding support. This solution is necessary. She did not have flood insurance in 2012 and FEMA only gives successful applicants a maximum \$31,900, according to Good Shepherd. Most Sandy victims have damage totaling more than \$100,000. Harris and Archer both live in a zone that FEMA, in the fall of 2012, classified as Zone B, or a non-emergency [clarify: and evacuation] zone. Those flood maps have since been re-drawn, a measurement that both identifies Canarsie as an at-risk area and increases flood insurance rates. But as ProPublica reported last year, the city flood maps circulated at the time of Sandy were inaccurate, and this was known to FEMA and other government officials. Archer received emergency funding from FEMA after the storm, but the amount was not sufficient to cover all of her costs. “Everybody is struggling to fix their homes,” Archer said. “We are all in the same boat around here.” Like residents in Canarsie, Sandy-affected people in the Rockaways are no longer expecting Build it Back to step in and assist in a meaningful fashion, according to Tom Miner, the director of the home recovery and rebuilding organization, Friends of Rockaway. “People have been waiting for a good long while right now and they are queued up and ready to go and really hoping that we get in there,” Miner said. “The cost of renting if someone cannot be in their homes means that money is bleeding out and that continues, the longer it takes to get that family back into their house.” The Brooklyn Recovery Fund, established by the Brooklyn Community Foundation and the Office of the Brooklyn Borough President and Brooklyn Chamber of

Commerce, has dispersed \$3.5 million to more than 100 community-based organizations addressing the aftermath of Sandy. As of March 28, the American Red Cross had provided \$14.6 million to New York City residents alone through its Move-in Assistance program. That can cover the costs of anything from moving vans to furniture. It had also issued about \$52 million to nonprofit and community organizations working on Sandy recovery. The organizations executing the bulk of the recovery work in the field have struggled to keep up with the demand from New Yorkers. Friends of Rockaway has more than 200 people on its waiting list. Rebuilding Together has a waiting list of about 300 people in the New York area. Friends of Rockaway aims to rebuild 70 homes this year, a task that will be completed with a group of AmeriCorps volunteers, donations from faith based groups and private foundations, and contracted engineers, plumbers and contractors. Some Rockaways residents, in the meantime, continue to stay in homes that are dangerous and essentially uninhabitable, according to Miner, with inhabitants restricted to one area of a house, most often without an operating kitchen. A quiet uncertainty follows all disasters. In the midst of the pounding of rain and the swirl of wind, it is challenging to assess how much the water could actually accumulate and how many trees, houses, cars, animals and people fall and get sucked away. Today there remain conflicting Sandy-related death toll accounts. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, drawing on American Red Cross data, estimated 117. The National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration places the number at 159. No organization or city agency has conducted a comprehensive study or has mapped all the Sandy damaged homes, according to Kimberly George, the executive director of the New York City office of Rebuilding Together. "I don't think there is one document that sees the big picture of what has been done and what needs to be done," said George. "It would be useful to have a tracking or a watchdog group looking at the entire picture." The Brooklyn Recovery Fund estimated in a January 2014 report that 11.4 percent of Brooklyn's landmass was flooded, damaging 115,000 homes and businesses. "Coastal communities continue to struggle," the report found. "Tenants face new and increasing landlord issues, including ongoing repair needs and rent hikes, and many have been forced to start over in unfamiliar neighborhoods." In Gerritsen Beach, where upwards of 90 percent of the homes were flooded, "residents have simply run out of money," according to the report. Such problems are unlikely to fade away in these outlying, typically poor Brooklyn neighborhoods, or in other Sandy-affected areas in Queens and on Staten Island. They are all high risk flood zones, subject to special building codes, insurance and environmental regulation. By 2050, the effects of global warming and rising sea levels are expected to produce heavier downpours and increased coastal flooding in New York City. These vulnerable regions of the city will be especially subject to the impact of rising sea levels. The sea level has risen in New York city by an average of 1.2 inches per decade since 1900, nearly twice the observed global rate during a similar period of time. Build it Back

claims that it is ready to help coastal residents prepare for the changes ahead."The work we are doing in the homes and in the neighborhoods is working to help them be more storm resistant for the future," Peterson said, following the opening of a construction project or was it actually an event? in Canarsie hosted by Rebuilding Together. "FEMA and the city and the Department of Buildings and everyone is working to ensure that we understand what elevation homes should be at and [they are] planning specific regulations in terms of building homes in these areas."I think that as climate change continues, things are changing and certainly have changed in the last 18 months but I think we have fairly clear guidance now on what we are doing," Peterson continued.The Rockaways, Canarsie and Red Hook are among the coastal spots that will be hit again, and again, when another storm that matches the size and power of Sandy falls on New York City. There is virtually no question that a storm of this magnitude will emerge, likely within the lifetimes of the people now trying to rebuild their damaged homes. Will community groups and private donations will again spearhead immediate and long-term relief and recovery work — and will the city continue to lag behind?What is clear, for now, is the strong correlation between the effects of climate change and poverty. Climate-related hazards "exacerbate other stressors, often with negative outcomes for livelihoods, especially for people living in poverty," the United Nation's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change found in a March 2014 report. Climate change and its impacts are projected to worsen poverty in most developing countries and to also create new "poverty pockets" in countries with increasing inequality, in both developed and developing countries.Poor people, on a global scale, are highly vulnerable to the droughts and floods that will accompany climate change and that can destroy crops, livestock and homes,according to the United Nations Environment Program.These poverty pockets in neighborhoods like Canarsie and Red Hook may be first exacerbated in form of the rising premiums for flood insurance that homeowners and renters have been told they must have, says Cruz, of Good Shepherd. If people in high-risk zones — and, inherently, poor or middle-income areas — do not have flood insurance, they are ineligible to receive any sort of public relief assistance, according to Cruz. But the insurance can be costly, and not everyone in these communities wants to or feels they can tack on the added expense. This Catch-22 will undoubtedly emerge as a serious problem in the months and years ahead in New York City.It is the poorest countries in the world that face an "adaptation deficit," or an inability to adapt adequately to existing climate risks, according to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. [clarify: Indeed, New York City is in a prime adaptability position] and has a fleshed-out climate change plan, which calls for capital investments in wastewater treatment plants and sewage systems, which could become better equipped to handle intense downpours. The city is also developing new areas that could serve as natural barriers for coastal storms and is developing tools to measure the city's present and future climate exposure.New York City

has not yet, however, developed — or, at the very least, has not publicly articulated — a clear strategy on how to intelligently and effectively cope with future Superstorms like Sandy, or with possibly other even greater natural disasters.