

Local 743 Members Volunteer to Help Tornado Victims

Days after severe tornadoes struck the Western Massachusetts region, thousands of families were struggling to clean up their ravaged properties and piece their homes and lives back together. The Pioneer Valley AFL-CIO, through its non-profit charitable arm, the Union Community Fund, tapped into the energy of the collectivist spirit of its unions and union members to pitch in and help.



"This is what unions are all about, picking our brothers and sisters up when they're down. Disaster relief is a natural fit for us because we have lots of networks in the community that we can leverage and activate to find those who needs our help and get them cleaned out from this mess," said Rick Brown, President of the Pioneer Valley AFL-CIO and one of the Union Community Fund's board members.

Rick has been coordinating the local volunteer effort from unions with authorities from local, state, and federal government agencies. Many families and individuals are in desperate circumstances with no home, no renters insurance, no belongings, not even so much as an ID. Over 300 displaced families are being sheltered at MassMutual convention center in Springfield, with hundreds more at the Big E fairgrounds in West Springfield.

Karen Minnie, a member of one of UFCW Local 1459, lost her home to a 100 foot oak tree that crashed into the middle of their roof while they were home watching a movie. Though they escaped injury by getting down into the basement, the damage to their Albee Street home was extensive, and it was declared uninhabitable by city inspectors. Coming on the heels of the death of her partner Julie's daughter, Amy, the timing of the disaster could not have been worse. In addition to the thousands of dollars just spent on the funeral, they now have at least \$3000 in deductibles costs. They simply don't have that kind of money. "We feel numb, it's like you can't process everything," Karen said. "We need help. It's tough. I'm very grateful that the union is getting involved and thankful that they are helping. It really means a lot," she continued.

Although OPEIU member Sue Kelleher's home escaped major damage, she now faces the major headache of cleaning out her now nearly treeless yard from the trees, limbs and brush that littered her property in Springfield. One estimate she got for cleaning things up put the cost at \$60,000 to have the downed trees removed, none of which, she says, would be covered by state or federal disaster relief efforts.

Four volunteers from Local Lodge 743, President Mark Hebert, Safety Rep. Penny Fitzgerald, and Human Rights Committee members Tony Fruster and Brenda Brown all volunteered to help Sue out. One of our volunteers, Brenda Brown said she jumped at the chance to pitch in when she got a call from Local 743's president, Mark Hebert. "I still can't believe that it happened here in our hometown. Anything I can do to help clean up and get our area back to normal, I will do." Sue was extraordinarily grateful for the assistance she received from all the Local 743 volunteers, saying, "You can't put a price on the help these folks are giving to us, there's no way to repay them."

Vira Cage, a member of UAW/GEO Local 2322, and her husband Edward, joined with dozens of other union members who responded to the Union Community Fund's call for volunteers who canvassed residents of a hard-hit neighborhood in West Springfield to tell victims where they can go to receive help. Their interactions with residents and the stories they find will be used to help the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) get additional funding into communities. Vira told about her encounters with residents who are not getting life-saving medications or face the possibility of eviction. "We're here because we want to support our union in doing this," she said.

Union volunteers also helped out in a number of other ways. George Noel, who is acting as a liaison between Governor Deval Patrick's office and the labor movement for the disaster relief, reports that IBEW Local 7 members are helping home owners restore electricity to their homes. Volunteers from UFCW Local 1459 sent people to remove belongings from an uninhabitable house on Hancock Street in Springfield. And from the eastern part of the the state, the Massachusetts Building Trades, Teamsters Local 25, and the Professional Firefighters of Massachusetts have joined together to collect and distribute disaster supplies into Western Massachusetts.

In addition to volunteer coordination, the Union Community Fund is leading a fundraising effort, reaching out to unions across the state and country, to get relief funds to victims trying to get back on their feet. "We're very grateful for the unions and individuals who have contributed and to the volunteers who donated their time and effort. But there's still a lot of work to be done, a lot of families that badly need assistance," said Rick Brown.

Donations to the Union Community Fund can be mailed to:

Union Community Fund
640 Page Blvd.
Springfield, MA 01104

For more information, call 413-827-0301.

Portions of this story taken from pvun.com

Brenda Brown and Penny Fitzgerald help in the tree clean up.



Tony Fruster getting it done!





President Mark Hebert strikes a pose!







Human Rights Committee members Tony Fruster and Brenda Brown, Safety Rep. Penny Fitzgerald, and President Mark Hebert.

