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NYC agency still struggles after terrorist attacks

By **Lisa Martino**
iCan News Service, contributor
December 6, 2001

As New York City slowly resumes its usual pace in the days since September's terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, at least one community resource for people with disabilities is not seeing a lessening demand for assistance.

Contrary to the idea that the need for emergency services would slow nearly three months after the tragedy, a continuous wave of people with disabilities is coming forward daily to ask for assistance, said Susan Scheer, executive director of the Center for Independence for the Disabled in New York City (CIDNY).

"We were severely put to the test," said Scheer, whose office was located in lower Manhattan and shut down for two days after the attacks. "In some ways it's getting worse. People who thought they could get by on their own are coming forward to ask for help."

Since Sept. 11, the center has provided direct services to 70 individuals and handles at least 100 phone calls for information on referral services.

"We've been deluged -- it's large quantities of people with complex needs," she added.

Cases range from people who need rides around town or an emotional boost to one displaced woman who came to CIDNY after not being able to take a bath for nine weeks because the temporary housing she was living in didn't have an accessible bath or shower.

Scheer adds that cases like this are examples of emerging "wrinkles" in the overall execution of assistance to people with disabilities. She points to a shortage of accessible hotel rooms to be used as temporary housing and cases where people who used wheelchairs couldn't stay in emergency shelters because their cots were too low to get into as examples of obstacles along the way.

To answer the growing needs for outreach help, volunteers from around the country have filed into CIDNY bringing food, making home visits, helping people fill out benefit requests and lending emotional support. And the center is eagerly welcoming donations such as money, wheelchairs, crutches, walkers, non-perishable food and toiletries to lighten the load. One volunteer with experience as a crisis counselor came to New York from her home in Milwaukee just to help out, Scheer said.

Volunteers have become increasingly important in answering the call for assistance in the benefits application process for people who have lost their homes or jobs.

"The system for getting assistance is pretty harsh for everybody," said Scheer. "For people with disabilities, getting around has become a phenomenal challenge."

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, nearly 4 million people with disabilities live in New York City.

Not only is it difficult for people with mobility issues to wait in endless lines and be shuffled around to different government agencies, but getting anywhere at all is still difficult. Because private vehicle restrictions in lower Manhattan made the subway one of the only ways to get around, it's left many with respiratory or mobility issues without a mode of transportation to get to government agencies to fill out benefit paperwork.

In response, CIDNY has worked with city and state offices to get permission for Access-A-Ride -- the city's door-to-door service for people with disabilities -- to take people into certain parts of the city closest to ground zero. However, transportation continues to be an issue because of the periodic and unexpected shut downs of streets.

Access-A-Ride officials report that service beyond the lower Manhattan area is back to normal.

Other city agencies around New York report that services and activity have returned to their normal pace.

Back on track is the city's meal delivery program, Citymeals-on-Wheels, which did encounter some setbacks because of bridges and tunnels being closed after Sept. 11 and also after the crash of American Airlines Flight 587 in Belle Harbor, Queens, on Nov. 12, said Program Coordinator Alison Leavitt.

One of the program's seven centers located below 14th Street closed without providing meals on Sept. 11, but in order to prevent a shortfall of services in the future, Leavitt said Citymeals-on-Wheels sent out emergency food packages containing enough non-perishable food for 12 meals to its clients. Most of these had already reached homes

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before the November plane crash, she said.

Also continuing with business as usual is Helen Keller Worldwide, according to Barbara Hodgson, spokeswoman for the nonprofit agency dedicated to eradicating blindness and providing rehabilitation services for people with visual impairments. The agency has not seen a disruption in services, but its headquarters was destroyed by the toppling of the World Trade Center towers, and numerous archival items were lost forever.

Uptown, at the League for the Hard of Hearing, Executive Director Keith Muller said scheduling and services returned to their usual pace as of the end of October.

The center, which in part provides job placement, hearing tests and rehabilitation, previously saw a 50 percent appointment cancellation rate with people too afraid to venture into New York, even though offices are located uptown from ground zero.

"They're really not at peace with it, but they are returning," he said.

As for the deaf and hard of hearing community in New York, Muller said they face a new complication as of Sept. 11-- job placement. With so many newly displaced workers in the area, the center's job placement component is facing a challenge that was markedly smaller on Sept. 10.

Scheer agrees.

"Needless to say, this is a tough challenge since 75,000 people have lost their jobs in New York City since this happened," she said.

For more information

To make a financial donation to the Center for Independence for the Disabled in New York City, send it to:

841 Broadway, Room 205
New York, N.Y. 10003
Phone (212) 674-2300
Email: cidny1@aol.com

Indicate that you wish the donation to go to the emergency fund.

If you'd like to volunteer or donate equipment or supplies, contact Deborah Lack at dlack@cidny.org.

Lisa Martino is a Metro Detroit freelance writer. She is a former staff writer for Detroit's alternative weekly newspaper, Metro Times, and a former editor for Detroit.Citysearch.com.

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