

# NYC PROVIDERS RAISE BAR ON DISASTER PREPAREDNESS

**ON A RECENT SUNNY DAY IN NEW YORK CITY**, a hotel ballroom in Times Square was packed with nearly 150 attendees from some 90 nursing homes. The crowd



consisted of staff members who had gathered for a two-day training on disaster preparedness.

Disaster, of course, is not new to the Big Apple and its denizens. But this training was new to many of the participants

because it was on the Nursing Home Incident Command System (NHICS), a disaster preparedness system built on the national Incident Command System, a uniform management model that allows its users to adopt a standard approach to responding to incidents.

While the ICS has been around for nearly three decades, the NHICS program was created about seven years ago, and it has since been making its way across the country via training programs like this one.

The training was organized by the 1199SEIU United Healthcare Workers Labor Management Project, a program aimed at bringing workers together with their employers to collectively solve problems in their nursing homes. The goal of the program is to create "a positive work environment and improve patient care."

So, with the memory of super storm Sandy still fresh in their minds—and just one day after the Boston Marathon bombing—frontline caregivers huddled with administrators and

other managers to conduct table-top exercises based on a fictitious disaster befalling the city.

Leading the day's training were Stan Szytek, a former firefighter and battalion chief with the Chicago Fire Department, and Jocelyn Montgomery, clinical affairs program director for the California Association of Health Facilities.

Day-glow yellow vests, worn by the day's "incident commanders" dotted the room. Clustered around the tables' easel pads were scribes taking notes on how the nursing home would handle the day's calamities.

As the crowd worked the easels and made use of their new NHICS training, Szytek interrupted periodically with a fire alarm bell to announce a status update. At the end of the day, tables reported on their work and discussed the pros and cons of the actions they had planned to take.

Although it's universally acknowledged that New York nursing home providers did an excellent job of managing residents during and after Sandy, the aftermath was a wake-up call nonetheless. "We knew that we could still use more training and direction to prepare for the next disaster," says Patricia Smith, vice president of 1199SEIU New York Nursing Home Division and co-chair of the event.

Four nursing homes in Smith's division were severely damaged by Sandy (see *News story, April 2013 issue*).

"While staff did a wonderful job, this training came at the right time," she says. "The disaster showed us that there were no titles when this happened. Everyone chipped in. This training today will help us to be ready for any type of disaster."

The 1199 regions already had plans to meet separately to familiarize all staff members with the NHICS and the training. "We'll introduce some of what took place today and bring them up to date," says Smith. "We want to be more alert. There are so many things that can happen in a nursing home."

—Meg LaPorte



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