

# POST-SANDY: DELIVERING ON A PROMISE

By Dave Willis

Some 650,000 houses, 250,000 vehicles and 65,000 recreational boats were damaged or destroyed by Sandy, the hurricane-turned-superstorm that hit New Jersey and the New York area last fall. What wasn't damaged, according to Nick San Filippo, president of Clark, New Jersey-based American Insurance Services Agency, was local residents' determination. "New Jersey people are a hardy bunch," he explains. "We're working through this, we're getting over it, and we'll come out on top."

As the storm approached, San Filippo was at his home in Brick near the Jersey shore, preparing for the anticipated winds, rain and storm surge. He'd been through the drill before, but this time was different. Brick experienced a direct hit from the northern—and most powerful—side of

*When a superstorm hits, it's the character of agency employees that makes the difference*



# Sandy's east coast damage totals

65,000 Boats

650,000 Houses

250,000 Vehicles



the then-westbound storm. "Rain was coming in sideways, the winds were fierce and alarms were going off," he recalls. "Everyone lost power."

"One minute the water was calm; the next it was four feet over the dock," he adds. "Gas pipes ruptured, electricity arced, and homes burned. Sand from along the barrier islands was in the bay, in homes—up to four feet deep—and on the streets."

After Sandy passed, San Filippo navigated his boat to Comstock Marina, where marina owner Don Ditzer had arranged for fuel delivery to power the boat's generator. "That let me use the boat as emergency housing," San Filippo recalls, "and I was able to maintain contact with the office as response and recovery efforts began."

Forty miles northwest, in Clark, Sandy had toppled trees, downed power lines and caused extensive property damage. "Getting to work was nearly impossible," recalls agency vice president Dawn Law. "What's normally a ten-minute drive took 45 to 50 minutes, zigzagging up and down a maze of streets to avoid downed trees."

Law had learned from Rich Kukla, president of SimpleNet Solutions, the agency's IT provider, that the office had power. She recorded a message on an office phone extension, which employees call after an emergency, letting them know the office would be open. As she made her way in, Kukla worked with Monmouth Telecom's Keith Fallon to transition the agency's phone service, which relied on cable Internet access that had been knocked out, to an emergency back-up T-1 line.

Law was joined that first morning by nearly a third of the agency's staff. "It was amazing how many showed up," Law says. It also was a good thing. "We were busy," recalls Michelle Pereira, a customer service rep. "The phones rang all day."

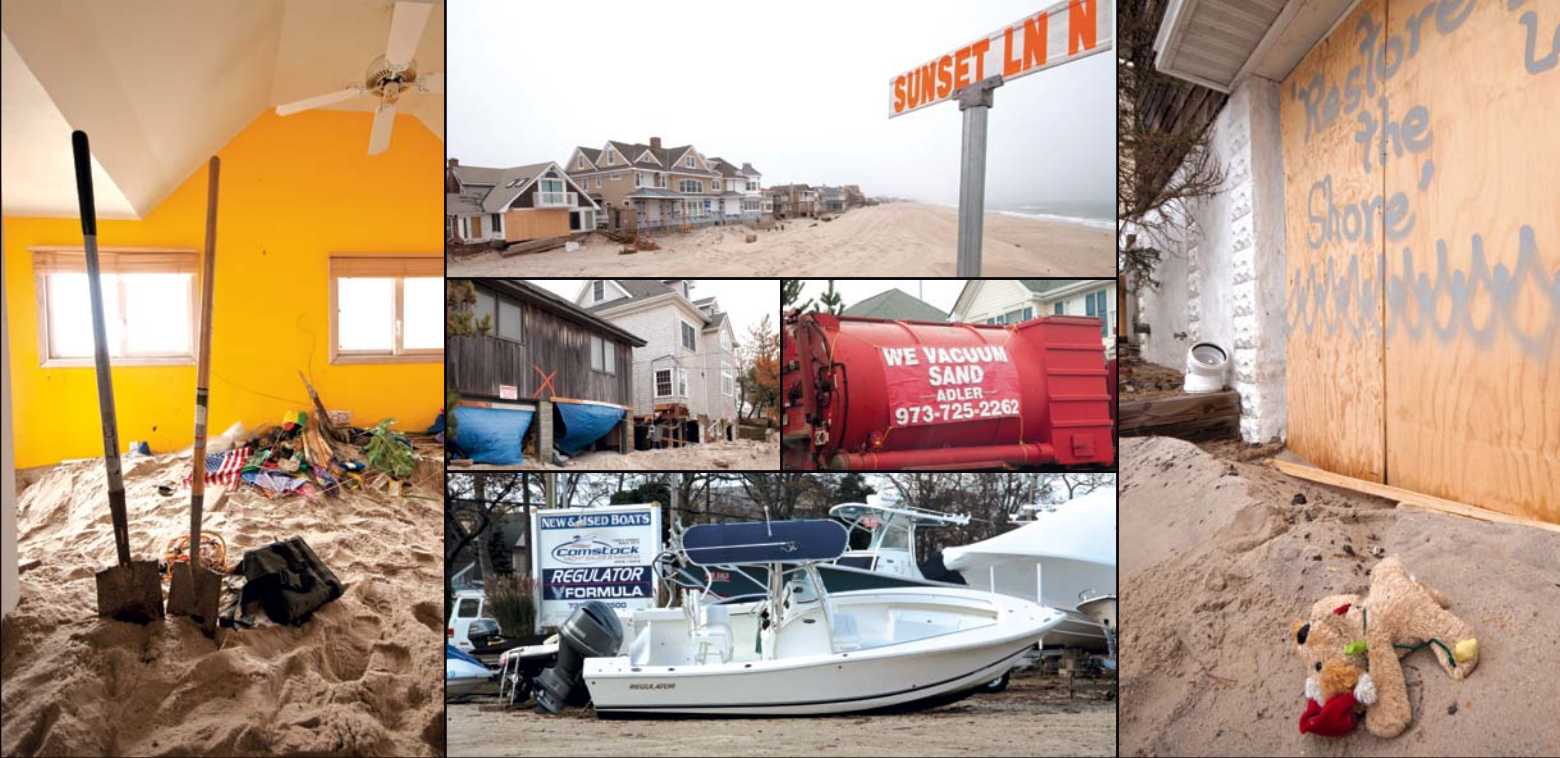
Clients walked in, too. "People couldn't believe we were open," says personal lines manager Anna Marie Simidzieska. "They were happy to find us up and running." Among those who showed up were the owners of a nearby dental clinic. "A tree had fallen through their building," Law says. "They had no power and they couldn't get their insurance paperwork. We sat down right away and got the claim moving."

Agency employees equipped the women's restroom with blow dryers, curling irons and makeup because they had no power at home, and they set up an ironing board and iron to press their outfits. "We wanted to look presentable for customers who came in," Law explains. "Having this mini-salon

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—Dawn Law





*Sand was everywhere, both inside and outside of homes and businesses along the Jersey shore.*

was kind of fun,” in the midst of a lot of non-fun.

The collegial atmosphere generated by the personal-care station lightened things up a bit, as staff members worked through those initial post-Sandy weeks. “Things were really challenging,” says customer service rep Carolyn Day. “Customers were without power—some for up to two weeks, temperatures were in the 40s, which made things worse, and people were anxious. We spent a lot of time just listening to stories and empathizing. The emotional part was particularly tough.”

One customer learned that his flood claim might not be settled for up to six weeks. “He was screaming mad,” Law recalls, “because he needed to get his heat back on. A heating contractor could do the work, but needed the money up front. The adjuster had been out, so we told him to get it fixed and wait for the check.”

The customer broke down and admitted he didn’t have the money to do that, so agency employees offered to advance the money. “That stopped him in his tracks,” Law says. “He said, ‘I can’t believe you offered that.’ We had

a very touching conversation, and he was very emotional about it.” Grateful for the offer, he ended up borrowing from a family member.

Another customer, a 77-year-old man, had been in his home without heat or power for seven days. “Nick offered to put him up in a hotel, but he said, ‘No, I can’t take a handout,’” Law says. “People still have a lot of pride.” The man came into the office a few days later to personally thank the staff. “He actually recorded a

testimonial, mentioning how helpful it was to have us here, which is on our Web site,” she adds.

In time, the staff worked through the challenges. “All told, we received close to 450 claims here in the office,” Law says. “Most commercial claims come to the office, and personal lines claims often go to the carrier directly, but we were more involved than normal with personal lines claims because some customers didn’t have carrier info handy. It was very, very hectic.”



*Nick San Filippo (right) thanks Keith Fallon of Monmouth Telecom for making possible a quick transition from the agency’s regular phone line service to an emergency back-up line.*

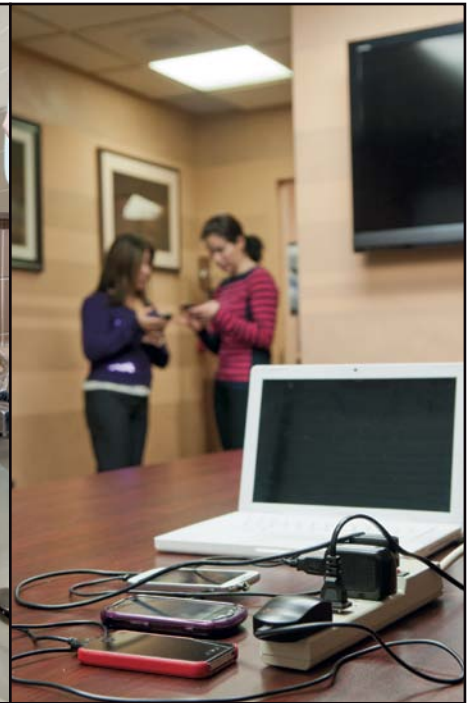
According to San Filippo, the agency weathered the storm and was able to help clients get back to normal because of advance preparations the staff had made. "Everything we put in place paid off for customers in their time of need," he remarks. From a well-thought-out disaster plan and a committed staff to paperless files and a robust electronic database that allows for remote access, everything the agency had put in place came together.

Pre- and post-storm communication played an important role. "On our agency Facebook page and Web site, we provided preparedness information ahead of the storm, and contact details and other updates afterwards," Law says. "On our community-based Web site, CommunityConnectNJ.com, we encouraged people to come to our agency to charge their phones and other devices."

Sandy helped teach the agency—and its customers—some important lessons about insurance coverage and claims response. "We learned to expect the unexpected," Law comments. "Some carriers did really well with claims. Others were not as well prepared."

Customers also learned about the importance of appropriate coverage. "Too many people want to buy insurance like it's a loaf of bread and they aren't interested in advice," Law says. "Sandy taught them that there are differences in policies, and that's a wake-up call for us to be even more diligent with clients and less willing to take 'no' for an answer." The agency plans to bring in carrier flood staff—underwriters and claims reps—to help bolster awareness and provide education.

Looking back at what the agency and its clients went through after the storm, San Filippo is reminded of the importance—and value—of having a



*American Insurance Services was one of the fortunate few among businesses and homes in the area that had electricity immediately after the storm. The agency invited its employees and clients to use its electricity to charge phones and computers. Restrooms were a place to do hair and makeup.*

properly trained and well equipped staff. "Through this all, I was most impressed with our people," he says. "They showed up at work, even though their lives were turned upside down. Their power was out, their kids were home because schools were closed, some had property damage of their own, but they were here, taking care of our clients."

"They say small businesses are like beer: the bottleneck usually is at the top," he remarks. "I learned that our people were able to work well without my being here. They can—and did—deliver on the promise we made to our clients when we insured them."

It was great to see them pull together and handle all the hard work, while at the same time holding clients' hands and wiping their tears." San Filippo notes that similar efforts were undertaken by hundreds of independent insurance agencies throughout the affected area, "The emergency is not over, and we continue to serve our communities and keep the promises we made," he concludes. ■

### The author

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