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City&Region

Front Page > City&Region > Buffalo

Storm forces shelters to breaking point

Soup kitchens struggle to help the neediest

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Robert Kirkham/Buffalo News
Sister Mary Johnice Rzadkiewicz serves lunch to Larry Truman in St. Adalbert's Response to Love Center.

The Loaves and Fishes soup kitchen at Lafayette Presbyterian Church hasn't been able to serve lunch because it still had no power Tuesday.

Haven House's emergency shelter for victims of domestic violence was operating on a small generator that kept conking out.

The volunteers at Little Portion Friary on Main Street who managed to make it to their shifts at the shelter were all working double duty.

Last week's surprise storm has been hard on everyone in the Buffalo area - but it has brought the city's hungry and homeless, and the organizations that help them, to near breaking point.

"Everybody is doing the best they can," said Anne Harrington, director of Loaves and Fishes, who was nervously awaiting word from National Grid about when power would be back on. "But without any communication, it's tough to know what to do," she said.

The city's shelters, soup kitchens and food pantries were desperately struggling to help the area's neediest, said Bill O'Connell, executive director of the Homeless Alliance.

Several shelters, including the Little Portion Friary, that provide shelter for men and women still were without power.

"We're operating on candlelight," said Ray Szymkowski, 75, one of the few volunteers who had been able to show up for duty at the friary.

"Right now, we've got a lot of people working double duty," he said. "The volunteers are dedicated. They're bringing in supplies and milk and all that other stuff. We could use some more. People are getting scared."

Kate Joyce, director of Haven House, said the generator running at the domestic violence shelter was providing power to the displaced women and children staying at its secret location. The staff was working by candlelight.

"We're limping along," Joyce said.

Haven House's emergency shelter was at capacity, Joyce said, and its transitional housing program had about 50 residents.

At the Response to Love Center, a soup kitchen at St. Adalbert's Basilica on the East Side, Sister Mary Johnice Rzadkiewicz fretted all weekend about getting the power back on in time



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- Filippo's
- Hirsch's Restaurant
- Rick's On Main Street
- Valley Inn Barbeque (The)

for Monday's meal services at 9 a.m.

"I felt so helpless," the nun said. "I prayed: 'God, you've got to help.' "

With no power Monday morning, the kitchen staff made do. The refrigerator and freezer had stayed cold through the weekend, and the staff started cooking hot meals on gas stoves, waiting for the sun to come up.

A steady stream of hungry people poured into the soup kitchen for hot meals - at least double the normal crowd.

Desperate for help, Sister Johnice reached out to Mayor Byron W. Brown, Council Member David A. Franczyk, Fire Department Chief Michael Lombardo and Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton.

Then at about 10 p.m. Monday, the Army Corps of Engineers arrived to assess what size generator the center needed.

At about 2 a.m. Tuesday, Rzadkiewicz awoke in the convent to the sound of an alarm.

"We have power," she said she exclaimed as she flipped on the power to have light for the first time since Friday.

"I'm so relieved," Rzadkiewicz said as a giant 35-kilowatt generator roared outside the soup kitchen. "It's a wonderful feeling. It's so special."

The Homeless Alliance is asking for donations and volunteers for the city's shelters and soup kitchens. To help, go to the alliance Web site at a www.wnyhomeless.org and see what's needed at the area's shelters.

Donations are also being accepted at the Response to Love Center, 130 Kosciuszko St. Call 894-7030 for more information. Hot meals are available to anyone who comes in, including relief workers.

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