

COHOES FIRE COMMUNITY REPORT

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the Diocese of Albany

When the devastating fire broke out in Cohoes in late November, I knew that Catholic Charities had to do something to help. We had experience in disaster case management, but that was mostly around helping survivors of hurricanes and floods rebuild their lives. Many of our lessons could be applied to the Cohoes fire, and when the City of Cohoes asked us to step in and help distribute the funds raised by the generous community members, we did not hesitate to say yes.

I want to single out Wilhelmina Murray-Davis and Mary Olsen of our Disaster Case Management office for their fantastic work with the Cohoes fire survivors. Right off the bat they were calling and meeting with clients, and helping people who had been traumatized by the sudden and complete loss of their homes and all of their belongings. There was anger, exhaustion, and frustrations, and I saw firsthand how Mina and Mary in a calm and gentle manner treated each person with respect, understanding, and dignity. Months later, some

of the same people who were very upset at their first meeting were thanking Mina and Mary for the work they had done to help them rebuild.

100% of the donated funds went to fire survivors. 28 households were served, comprising of 43 people, and each person wrote a disaster recovery plan that we helped them achieve. A huge thank you to generous businesses like Huck Finn's Warehouse and B. Lodge and Co. And none of this could have been done without the donations from the Cohoes community and many friends and neighbors that were collected by KeyBank, CapCom, and Pioneer Bank.

Catholic Charities was honored to play a part in helping Cohoes and we are happy to provide this report back to the community.

RECOVERY BY THE NUMBERS

28 Households
& **43** People



were assisted by Catholic Charities Disaster Response and Recovery after the Remsen Street fire.

Over \$119,000 in aid was collected and distributed by Catholic Charities for fire survivors.

Donations

Pioneer Bank	\$36,640.72
Keybank	\$47,612.29
Cap Com	\$21,820.46
Polish National Alliance of N.A.	\$1,000.00
La Salle Institute	\$1,000.00
Additional Donations	\$9,981.97
Catholic Charities additional contributions	\$1,730.15
TOTAL	\$119,785.59

Expenses

Food	\$3,126.97
Furniture	\$55,530.92
Household Goods	\$35,696.54
Rental Assistance	\$18,333.00
Clothing	\$7,098.16
TOTAL	\$119,785.59

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REBUILDING AFTER THE FIRE

A fast-moving fire on the evening of November 30, 2017, tore through the Remsen Street area of Cohoes, upending lives and causing a massive amount of damage. Thankfully nobody was killed, but the rebuilding process from an event like this can take many months. That's where Catholic Charities comes in. "We're finding out quickly how [a fire] looks different than the disasters we've had a lot of history with," explained Mary Olsen. Mary and Wilhelmina Murray-Davis have a combined 28 years of experience in responding to disasters. Together, Mary and Mina run Catholic Charities Disaster Response and Recovery - an office that works to provide disaster case management services to survivors of natural and man-made disasters. They also assist in the development of local community organizations active in disaster (COAD).

The Catholic Charities Disaster Response and Recovery Office has responded to disasters on a local and national level, from storms to floods to hurricanes. The Red Cross dealt with the immediate aftermath of the fire, while the Cohoes community rallied together and raised over \$100,000 for the survivors. When the Mayor's office contacted Catholic Charities to assist in managing the funds, the Disaster Response and Recovery Office once again stepped up without hesitation.

While the Disaster Response and Recovery Office was able to effectively assist the community, the fire recovery was not without its challenges. Unlike previous disasters the office has faced, there could be no home visits, as so many survivors had no home to return to. "With a flood or a storm," explained Mina, "we would do home visits so that we could physically go there and assess the damage. With a fire that was very different because there was no home to visit."

The long-term recovery process can take time to work



Mary Olsen (left) and Wilhelmina Murray-Davis (right)

through, and that kind of deliberate and methodical recovery work is where Catholic Charities excels. Each survivor received a comprehensive intake to assess individual needs. Catholic Charities then worked with the survivors to best allocate the funds based on those needs. Those in need of furniture replacement were able to receive new furniture; residents who lost their homes received rent and security deposits for a new place.

"So, even though we were not necessarily cutting a check for them," said Mina of the process, "people were put back into new apartments, with each room furnished, with food and they were closely mirroring their pre-disaster state." Clients expressed gratitude for the experience and even those who began the process skeptical of Catholic Charities' approach were won over in the end. That has a lot to do with how Mina works with each client - with respect, compassion, and a 'get it done' attitude.

"The important thing to remember, is that every disaster is different," noted Mary, "We keep learning every single time there is a disaster." With Cohoes, the Disaster Response and Recovery Office has worked to improve their response to these kinds of disasters, and help coordinate the response from the community. So that if and when the next disaster happens, Catholic Charities will be better prepared to help our neighbors with the long-term recovery needs.

