



Storm dovetailed everyday job

By Anna L. Griffin
TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

MOC priority is the needy

FITCHBURG — Now the story can be told.

"Frankly everyone here has been so busy we haven't had time to actually talk about what happened," said Kathleen McDermott, the executive director for the Montachusett Opportunity Council.

MOC is the region's designated anti-poverty agency. It was called into action as an emergency responder during the storm Dec. 11-12 that crippled the area's utility infrastructure and left many without power for several days, and some without power for a week and a half.

Ms. McDermott said the agency responded immediately early on Friday, Dec. 12, when the scope of the emer-

gency was starting to become clear.

Two actions were taken to provide for immediate and short-term needs of these people, both related to food.

"Our staff came together and we quickly identified that food was going to be needed, and that we could provide it," Ms. McDermott said.

MOC is the region's "Meals on Wheels" provider, a service that delivers meals to homebound individuals, either because of their age or a disability.

The agency was able to utilize its catering kitchen to prepare additional hot meals for the emergency shelters and senior housing complexes in the region, including Leominster,

Gardner, Fitchburg, Lancaster, Westminster, Clinton, Sterling, Townsend, Hubbardston, Ashby and Templeton.

In total MOC provided more than 5,400 emergency meals during those critical days following the storm.

Additional nonperishable food was provided to the shelters through collaborative efforts with MOC, the Worcester Food Bank and Performance Food Group.

In its second action, the agency also provided more than \$45,000 in food vouchers to local grocery stores. It distributed these vouchers by establishing an intake process at its administrative office on Prichard Street.

Staff processed applications for 950

households and provided \$25 in food cards to individuals and \$50 in food cards to families.

The gift cards provided families the ability to purchase basic nutritional staples for their families. Donations from the Worcester County Food Bank also allowed for nonperishable food bags to be provided to every household that were given a voucher.

"We knew we had a mechanism in place to deal with the distribution of these food cards; a way that could get them into the hands of people who needed them the most," said Tricia Pistone, a spokesperson for MOC. "Some of the stories we were getting back from our workers were really touching."

"These are people who are living on the edge," Ms. Pistone said. "They were

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MOC took storm tasks into the highest gear

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struggling before the power outage."

A large portion of the funding for the effort came from the agency's recently established food and fuel fund, made possible by proceeds from the Taste of North Central.

Donations from the CHC Family Health Center and Health Alliance Hospital also made this effort possible.

"We're thankful to everyone who supported The Taste of North Central and made it such a financial success," Ms. McDermott said. "Had it not been for

those fundraising dollars, we would not have been able to respond in such a large scale to address the food needs of low-income individuals and families, especially in Fitchburg."

Fitchburg Mayor Lisa A. Wong noted MOC's work: "Not only did MOC respond to the emergency food needs of local residents at the temporary emergency shelter, they also quickly and effectively responded to the needs of the community's low-income residents by providing over 900 households with grocery store vouchers. This is community service at its finest."