

Red Cross Month Honors Volunteers

By Senator Lisa Baker

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Abraham Lincoln said the role of government is to do for others what they cannot do for themselves.

And while we have witnessed the capacity for government to improve lives through education, health care and more, we also know that government cannot be everywhere, nor be all things to all people.

That is when we most need public-private partnerships to step in and fill the void.

The American Red Cross is one such time-honored, time-tested, and literally—battle-tested—collaboration. As the Pennsylvania Senate acknowledged in Resolution 314, March is “American Red Cross Month”.

This internationally-recognized organization moves in when people who once were able to “do for themselves” no longer can. These needs often emerge at the cruel hands of a tragedy that strikes without warning—a fire, a flood, a snowstorm, a tornado.

Dating back to the iconic Clara Barton and the year 1881, the American Red Cross is now one of the most successful partnerships in U.S. history. The fifth largest charity when measured in private donations, this humanitarian organization has been designated by the U.S. Congress as the only non-governmental entity charged with leading and coordinating efforts to help after disasters requiring federal assistance.

Case in point: October 2012. Superstorm Sandy. After the screeching winds and torrential rains rolled on out, Red Cross volunteers swung into action to drive emergency food trucks to the newly homeless, help reunite separated families, and open shelters.

Although the Commonwealth escaped the depths of destruction that tore through the high-rises of New York and the beaches of New Jersey, Sandy claimed 16 lives in Pennsylvania alone and destroyed the homes of more than 9,000 families. Red Cross volunteers assisted with short-term and long-term recovery efforts, moving those without shelter into longer-term housing and providing resources to repair homes.

They worked one-on-one with families who needed extra help finding resources and recovering, including finding child care, medication, and answers to insurance paperwork. They worked with government, churches and nonprofits. More than 17,000 disaster workers helped those affected by Sandy, providing food, water and a supportive shoulder.

Although these volunteers often go unseen and unsung, they have done the same for victims at home and abroad for more than a century. The Red Cross responds to nearly 70,000 disasters a year in the U.S., and 2,500 in Pennsylvania alone.

This year in particular, as snowstorm after snowstorm sparked prolonged power outages, some homeowners resorted to unconventional and dangerous ways to heat their homes, igniting devastating house fires. When the smoke clears, the Red Cross remains, to house victims and to help with all remaining needs.

They also support military members, veterans and civilians; collect and distribute about 40 percent of the blood supply for transfusions; and train more than 7 million people in first aid, water safety and other life-saving skills each year.

The state has a key role to play in their emergency response and recovery efforts. The General Assembly has helped the Red Cross provide long-term housing through designated budget dollars. Last year, we successfully passed legislation providing for a voluntary check-off on state income tax refunds to make it easier for good-hearted people who want to donate to this respected charity.

In tough economic times, we need the Red Cross the most. They pick up where government cannot, and pick up the pieces when families and communities lie broken.

Whether the Red Cross is replenishing the nation's blood supply, teaching first aid and CPR classes, or giving clothes to a family of fire victims, the Red Cross is a guardian angel, in the spirit of founder Clara Barton, hailed as the "guardian angel" of the Civil War Battlefield.

In March, and every month, Pennsylvanians are urged to remember the rescuers who continue to labor in the calm after the storm, by donating time, money or life-saving blood.

As Abraham Lincoln famously said: "I am a firm believer in the people. If given the truth, they can be depended upon to meet any national crisis." Given the resources, the Red Cross has.