With Hunger Rising, Local Groups Do Their Part

By DANILKA INFANTE

Even before Hurricane Sandy left thousands of New Yorkers without power and many homeless, the city was facing a surge in hunger.

The numbers are staggering in a city seemingly flush with resources. An average of 1.5 million New York City residents, one in four being children, live in households where a steady supply of food is not secure, according to the New York City Coalition Against Hunger.

Although the hurricane did not do extensive damage to the Bronx compared to other boroughs, it remains number one in hunger. Before Sandy, 533,825 Bronx residents (40 percent) lived in a home where there was not enough food. More than half of Bronx children, about 199,000, live in homes that lack enough food. The hunger coalition conducted their first analysis of senior data and found that one in five Bronx residents over the age of 60 is battling against hunger.

Hunger problems are taxing the city’s free food providers like never before. Food pantries, soup kitchens and brown bag programs have reported a 20.8 percent increase for their services, mainly families with children.

This is not surprising since the high demands for these services have only risen since the recession that began in 2008. Almost 90 percent of food pantries and soup kitchens in the Bronx saw an increase in the number of people they served in 2012. Of the people served, 70 percent had paying jobs and 90 percent were families with children.

In the northwest Bronx, two groups are doing their part to ease the hunger crisis.

Part of the Solution (POTS) a multi-service organization and soup kitchen on Webster Avenue, is literally part of the solution to end hunger.

“POTS is serving more individuals in 2012 than at any point in its 30-year history,” said Christopher Bean, executive director of POTS. “The needs of low-income individuals are complex and demand the comprehensive response that POTS, as a ‘one-stop-shop’ provides.”

In addition to hot meals and a food pantry, POTS provides legal assistance, hot showers, clothing, job readiness help and even haircuts.

On the Monday before Thanksgiving, POTS was buzzing. Earlier in the day, Mets legend Rusty Staub, stopped by, along with several elected officials, and delivered a $50,000 check to help keep POTS in business.

POTS tries hard to eliminate the stigma attached to needing food. Their soup kitchen is like a restaurant, its pantry like a grocery store. A hostess shows diners to their table, which are nicely decorated with holiday themed centerpieces. Volunteers serve meals. Today it’s rotisserie chicken, with sides of macaroni and cheese, salad, biscuits, and a cinnamon bun as dessert. Volunteers act like waiters and refill empty cups with juice and water.

This is what POTS is all about, says chef Keith Bell, not separating themselves from the people in need but coming together as a community to move forward.

“We are here to help people get back on their feet and better themselves,” says volunteer Angel Maria Axbar.

“Regardless of your situation, whether you are a victim of the recent Hurricane Sandy disaster or experiencing hard times, this food pantry has one goal in mind – to provide you with a hot meal,” says Councilmember Joel Rivera.

On Nov. 21, the day before Thanksgiving, another multi-service organization, Bronx Works, hosted three different Thanksgiving events throughout the Bronx for low-income seniors.

Lucesita Lombillo, an employee at East Concourse Senior Center, says “We do this for the seniors. They love to have a good time. They dance, sing, eat and take some food home with them.”

The pre-Thanksgiving day event has been going on since 2004. Lombillo says the seniors helped her decorate the room and tables. Before the meal, people went around saying what they were thankful for. Then, they partied.

Solomon Smart, director of East Concourse Senior Center says the seniors “don’t want to stop celebrating — they are hopping from center to center.”