

Coney Island Hospital Gets Head Back Above Water

By DAVID SIMS | Posted: Monday, November 26, 2012 4:45 pm

The carnage wrought by Hurricane Sandy on Coney Island Hospital is clear to the naked eye: most of the walls on the first floor have been ripped out because they were soaked with salt water; the hub of the emergency room is now a stripped-down husk awaiting total refurbishment.

But the hospital, which lost power for only four hours and has been conducting outpatient services, will resume limited ER service by the end of the month and full service by January 2013, although repairs to gird it against future super-storms will take longer and cost more.

Emergency-Repair Funding

Right now, the Health and Hospitals Corporation is relying on the \$300 million in emergency funds authorized by Mayor Bloomberg and the City Council for immediate repairs, which should cover the agency until FEMA reimbursement money begins to flow to the city, HHC President Alan Aviles said.

Mr. Aviles toured the hospital with officials Nov. 20, praising the efforts of its workers and private contractors to keep services going and patients safe in the immediate aftermath of the storm.

He was stationed at Coney Island's emergency command center on the night Sandy made landfall, and recalled looking out the window as the storm surge flooded the hospital and seeing people trudging through a couple of feet of water to get to its entrance.

He assumed it was people seeking medical attention, but later learned that it was "Coney Island staff braving the worst of the storm to get to the hospital and help our patients. I will never forget that image," Mr. Aviles told reporters.

Coney Island prepared for the storm the best it could and managed to shut down its emergency generators, which are elevated 12 feet above ground, before they were hit by a storm surge larger than anyone had predicted (about 14 feet).

Key to Restoring Power Quickly

That meant that while the hospital was powerless for a few hours during the height of the storm, it could restore power much quicker, as its generators never shorted out. With the help of Con Edison, power was restored to part of the hospital quickly, and outpatient primary-care services could resume.

But the damage from the flooding was severe. The sheet-rock walls of the hospital's main

building, emergency room and busiest outpatient service areas were damaged beyond repair, absorbing so much salt water that they had to be removed and are in the process of being replaced.

The building's basement was flooded from floor to ceiling and had to be pumped out with industrial equipment which removed some 5 million gallons of water in 60 hours, said the hospital's Executive Director, Arthur Wagner.

Luckily, Coney Island Hospital was near the end of a major capital project to add 7,500 square feet to its ER with a new, modern wing, which was barely damaged by the storm and is now ready to open and provide a base level of emergency care. Further repairs will have everything ready by January, Mr. Wagner said.

'Irene' Evacuation Good Prep

"The staff was well-trained and well-prepared," he said, noting that an evacuation during the less-severe Hurricane Irene last year had served as valuable experience for the hospital.

"We are working around the clock to clean-up and restore these main areas and we hope to have those back in operation by next month," he added. "But more work will be needed to repair or replace the major systems that were affected, including the electrical, communications, mechanical and heating systems."

Medical Director Dr. John Maese called Oct. 29 "Coney Island Hospital's finest hour," recounting the efforts of ER staff to move patients into a part of the building that still had power as flood waters began to rush around their feet.

Twenty-eight patients were moved within 15 minutes as the waters rose. "It was an amazing feat," he said.

Chief Nurse Terry Mancher, who has worked at Coney Island for 34 years, recalled with amazement the sight of staff working without any power at all during the height of the storm. "We didn't lose one patient," she said. "This is what makes me so proud to work here."

The hospital right now is offering outpatient primary-care service for children and adults, with limited specialty care and adult and pediatric clinics, from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. on weekdays and 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. on weekends. It is also operating three mobile medical units in Brooklyn and Staten Island serving communities hit hard by the storm.

Other Hospitals Damaged

Coney Island patients have been transferred to private and public hospitals around the city while it works to rebuild. Two other HHC facilities, Bellevue Hospital on Manhattan's East Side and Coler-Goldwater on Roosevelt Island, also sustained serious damage and will tap the \$300 million

in emergency funds.

But the question of costs and the specifics of preparing for the next storm will come later, Mr. Aviles said. Currently HHC is “totally focused” on bringing its damaged facilities back online.

“We haven’t even been invoiced for all this work,” Mr. Aviles said. “The subsequent work will be to reposition these systems above grade...we have to make a decision of whether or not it’s possible to make these systems completely impregnable.”