

# Sandy recovery group disbanding in Atlantic County

DIANE D'AMICO, Staff Writer | Posted: Friday, May 29, 2015 3:30 am

The Atlantic County Long-Term Recovery Group, formed in 2013 to help residents affected by Hurricane Sandy, is disbanding this month.

“We’re out of money, not out of need,” said Amanda McGowan, who heads the group, which will host an event to mark its closing June 12 at the Laguna Grill in Brigantine.

The advisory work done by individual member groups will continue, especially as residents get grants to have their homes elevated.

LTRGs were formed in every affected county after the storm, combining the efforts of multiple social service agencies to meet the varying needs of hundreds of residents.

McGowan said the county LTRG received more than \$1 million from various sources, and about two-thirds of it was used to help residents with unmet construction needs. Funds also provided rental assistance and home essentials such as appliances.

Victoria Phillips, executive director of the Mental Health Association of Atlantic County, said they began working with the N.J. Hope and Healing team right after the storm, going door to door to help with emotional healing and help direct residents to LTRG resources.

“We were able to take our cases to the LTRG for funding,” she said. “But just because the money is gone, it by no means says the recovery is over. There are a cadre of agencies still working, though there are far less resources now.”

In April, the state announced a third and likely final round of federal funding totaling more than \$4.1 billion statewide for programs to help repair and elevate primary homes and finance rental housing and provide rental funding assistance.

McGowan said a big concern right now locally is that homeowners who must leave while their homes are elevated have a hard time finding a place to stay in the summer or the funds to pay rent



## LTRG CLOSING

Jane Peltonen talks in front of her home. Thursday May 28 2015 Brigantine resident Jane Peltonen talks about the long process of getting home repairs after Hurricane Sandy. The county Long Term Recovery Group will be closing soon. (The Press of Atlantic City / Ben Fogletto)

if they are also paying a mortgage. She said Sandy problems have been compounded by casino layoffs.

This week, Gov. Chris Christie's administration announced it has increased the amount and number of months for the Rental Assistance Program, or RAP, providing as much as \$1,300 per month for as many as nine months. McGowan said their average rental assistance amount has been \$5,300.

Retired teachers Jane and August Peltonen, of Brigantine, are still waiting for work on their home to be completed. Jane said she might not have made it without LTRG member support to get through the bureaucracy and emotional trauma.

"They've been lifesavers through this," she said. "They are caring people who put their own lives on hold to help us. I would have been in the crazy house without them."

Groups such as BrigStrong out of Brigantine and the Atlantic City LTRG coordinated services while offering targeted assistance to residents. At one point, the Atlantic County group had as many as 40 members that included organizations such as the Red Cross, United Way, Catholic Charities, Atlantic County Mental Health Association and Jewish Family Services

Tom Milhous, of BrigStrong, vice chair of the LTRG, said working together made it possible to provide very localized services but also get access to outside help and grants. He said more than 100 Brigantine families got assistance.

"We knew where the needs were in our community," he said. "We could do case management work."

While the hundreds of volunteers from across the country who came into the area to help rebuild the last two summers won't be back this year, organized groups are still rebuilding homes. Atlantic City formed its own Long Term Recovery Group and is working with a United Methodist Church group — A Future with Hope — to finish homes in the city.

ACLTRG Director Clarence Alston said they have completed 125 homes in Atlantic City, and while they have cut back on outreach as funding dwindled, new cases still come up.

"It helped to have a county group so we didn't have to do everything ourselves," he said. He added that some people still have mold issues, and some people are just reaching out for the first time.

"After two years, we still get people who say they didn't know they could get help," he said.

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### **ATLANTIC COUNTY LONG-TERM RECOVERY GROUP BY THE NUMBERS**

Total grants received: \$1,131,857

Number of volunteers in 2014: 959

Number of volunteer hours in 2014: 165,000

Number of cases handled by the county LTRG: 139

Number of homes repaired: 69

Average home repair cost: \$12,300

Number of homes repaired by Atlantic City LTRG: 125

Source: Long Term Recovery Groups