



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

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From the Desk of Senator Jack M. Martins

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Then the Lights Came Back On

It was just a few short weeks ago that Superstorm Sandy was causing us nothing but panic and grief. It was one problem right after another making those few days feel like an eternity, but I think we can agree that it gave us new appreciation for simple pleasures like brewing a cup of coffee or taking a hot shower. As often happens in times of sacrifice, we grew in solidarity with our neighbors, pulling through with a sense that we were “all in this together.”

Then the lights came back on, the heat started working, gas stations came back online and we happily started to forget about Sandy. There were, of course, expensive and inconvenient repairs to be made, and donations to be sent, but for most of us on this part of the Island, life pretty much returned to “normal.”

But just a few miles to the south of us, the story is very different. There are literally hundreds of our neighbors without homes to go back to and many that still have no electricity, heat or working sewer lines. Portable latrines continue to line streets littered with mounds of discarded furniture and garbage, as far as the eye can see. Unfortunately, that will be the scenery for their holiday celebrations.

And now starts the heavy lifting. While government and nonprofit agencies have stabilized the situation with immediate, direct assistance, the work of rebuilding lives is just beginning. Residents will need the assistance of social services as they struggle with everything from construction costs to unemployment to mental health services. They've only just begun their long, hard road back and frankly, they need to know their neighbors haven't forgotten them.

That's why I'm writing about it today. I think we tend to get caught up in the holiday hype, myself included, and we need to bring it back around and remind ourselves what's still going on around us and what's truly important. Of course I know it's only human to want to move on after something no longer directly affects us, but this wasn't a tsunami in Asia or even Hurricane Katrina a thousand miles away. This is happening right here in our own backyard, just miles from our doorsteps, yet as I travel around our district, it seems to have fallen off our radars.

That's bad news because if we don't collectively keep it front and center, pressuring government to act swiftly, there's a very real possibility that feet will drag and hope will become regret. To that end, I've been selected to serve on a bipartisan Senate task force that's been charged with getting these neighborhoods back on their feet. I know – a task force sounds like more bureaucracy, but we are actually charged with just the opposite. Our job is to cut through all the red tape New York is so famous for, identify which neighborhoods need the most help and then make sure they get it. We'll also be looking at ways to ensure that New York is better prepared in the future and how to implement the recommendations of the committees that were created in the storm's aftermath. It is my ardent hope and my goal that we get this right, that we keep hope alive, and that we not rest until "normal" returns to our neighbors as well.

Recently, a member of a nonprofit disaster response team told me that when people inquire about volunteering, they often suggest driving down to an impacted community, walk along

the streets and offer to help with clean up. Inevitably, they said, volunteers will engage in hours of speaking with residents, and listening. And that was what victims needed most: to know that their neighbors care. I'll be down there tomorrow, doing the same, as a concerned neighbor. Maybe I'll see you there.