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Social media energize donation drives for Edgewater fire victims

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They tweeted, posted, shared and liked. And within days, community members raised more than \$140,000 on behalf of the tenants of the Avalon at Edgewater who were left homeless after an inferno consumed their apartment complex.

It's a real-time example of how social media and crowdfunding have become increasingly important when disaster strikes — even when that disaster is localized to a single community, or in this case, an apartment complex. The virtual pleas for help for the hundreds of residents displaced in the blaze resulted in tangible results — a steady stream of donations, from cash to clothes.

"I really believe that without social media we could not have raised this much money so quickly," said Sandy Rubinstein, whose Edgewater-based advertising firm partnered to start one of two fundraising websites. "Social media has a power that people probably realize is there, but might not really see until a moment like this — when it can literally change someone's life."

The ability to collect \$141,000 in just seven days with only a few clicks is becoming the norm, experts say.

Todd Wolfson, an assistant professor of media studies at Rutgers University, said the thousands of people tweeting, posting and donating in the wake of the Avalon fire was an example of how social media have changed the way people connect to a disaster.

"You used to see empathy that was, generally, geographic — you would feel for the people you lived near or saw every day," Wolfson said.

Social media "connects you in a way that wasn't really possible a few years ago," he added.

In Edgewater, for instance, crowdfunding pages have been set up for individual families that have already seen thousands of dollars in support, said Lorra Brown, an associate professor of communication at William Paterson University.

"It's not just collective empathy, it's collective awareness," she said. "The nature of social media is that you are receiving information about news, crises, fundraisers or what-have-you through friends that have shared it — and that creates a personal connection."

To date, EdgewaterStrong.com — the website supported by Rubinstein's DXagency and the Edgewater Education Foundation — has raised \$75,000. The foundation, which is a non-profit group affiliated with the local school district, will soon begin distributing funds to the hundreds of displaced tenants.



EdgewaterStrong.com has raised \$75,000 for victims of the Avalon at Edgewater fire last month.

At the same time, Edgewater officials also started collecting donations the day after the blaze via GoFundMe.com — a popular crowdfunding website. One week later, the borough's official page has received more than \$66,000 from 568 people. The donations from individuals ranged from \$25 to \$1,500. The site is now closed, but the page had been shared more than 1,400 times on Facebook and Twitter.

“Once the page was set up, we reached out to residents we knew who had Facebook pages or Twitter accounts and said please push this information out there,” said Edgewater Borough Administrator Greg Franz. “Everyone now realizes how important social media is in getting the word out, and I think it shows how important it was because the fruits of the two fundraising pages are showing with the amount of contributions that were made.”

However, since GoFundMe is not a 501(c)(3), like the school foundation, Franz said donors should consult with their tax professionals just like with any charitable contribution. He said the borough has been consulting with its finance professionals and Edgewater Strong to ensure “the integrity of the distribution” and are committed to “distributing the funds as expediently as possible.”

Rubinstein, meanwhile, said Edgewater Strong plans to divide the total number of units affected by the total funds it has. She said any funds they collect after the first disbursement would be distributed the same way each week.

After seeing a stream of posts about the fire on Snapchat, Twitter and Instagram, two 15-year-old Edgewater sisters organized the opening of the City Place donation center with the support of borough officials.

Arianne and Zara Zeigerman saw posts on their social media feeds — and were even Face-timed by one of their 31 friends who lived in the apartments as the fire raged — and rushed to the Eleanor Van Gelder School with pillows, blankets and jackets for the victims. Their home had been hit with 4 feet of flooding during Superstorm Sandy and they remembered the community outreach they had received, and wanted to return the favor.

The teens realized the town's community center was not large enough to fit the donations pouring in, and believed an empty storefront in the City Place shopping center would be more efficient. Their mother, who works with City Place, helped them secure the venue after they consulted with the mayor.

“If it wasn't for seeing all of those posts on social media, we wouldn't have known about the fire as quickly as we did and we wouldn't have been able to react as quickly as we did,” Zara said.

The next day, the borough-sponsored donation center moved into the space. Since then, hundreds of families have passed through its doors to gather much-needed clothing and supplies.

Larger relief agencies, such as the American Red Cross, have also made social media part of their response to disasters.

Laura Howe, the vice president of public relations for the Red Cross, said the organization uses its social media platforms not only for fundraising, but also gathering information about a disaster and what people are saying.

“Once we have that, we can use that information to tell people how to help themselves and help their neighbors,” she said.

In fact, after analyzing social media posts during Superstorm Sandy, the Red Cross began using the tool to change the way it operates, Howe said.

“We wanted to find a way to harness that power,” she said.

Moving forward, Edgewater officials plan to broadcast on their social media pages how Avalon victims can get the donations.

“Everyone knows someone else, who knows someone else,” Rubinstein said. “We're hoping that our messages reach those who maybe haven't updated their address or contact information.”

“With this, you have displaced families and entire lives disrupted — people cared immediately. When you use social media for something good, it really pays off.”

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