

Area Y's open doors to communities in crisis

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NORWALK

By CHASE WRIGHT

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Building strong communities is more than a motto for the YMCA, and when last weekend's storm struck the region, area Y's opened their doors to those in need.

The Westport-Weston YMCA opened its doors Sunday morning to more than 125 displaced residents in dire need of a shower and a warm facility.

"I didn't realize how much of a divide there was. There were some people who weren't affected by the storm at all and others who lost everything," said Vice President of Operations David Cohen. "We were glad to lend a helping hand in their time of crisis."

The Westport-Weston Y extended its hours beginning Sunday, and continued to open early through Friday so adults could shower before work, said Cohen.

Both members and nonmembers alike were free to roam the facility, shower, relax and relieve stress in the pool or the gymnasium, he said.

The Norwalk YMCA did the same for its community, but at a price.

The Norwalk Y charged the general public a reduced price of \$10 to use its facility on West Avenue for the day.

The fee to shower and use the center's other services was based on the fact that the Norwalk Y is located in an "urban community," said executive director Michael Case.

"We are a private club, and we felt that it was important for our members to know who's around," he said. "We're certainly not trying to make money."

Case added, "The Norwalk community knows that were here for them. We feel we're vital part of the community, we have been for 82 years and we'll continue to do that."

The Wilton YMCA was among the area Y's to open its doors to the general public free of charge, which it did beginning Monday morning, said Executive Director Robert McDowell.

About 20 families who lost power in the storm took advantage of the Y's offering, he said.

"Some were members, some were nonmembers, it didn't really matter," said McDowell. "We came together as a community."

In Greenwich, Darien and New Canaan, where the storm was particularly hard-hitting, the community YMCAs were also open to residents in need.

The Greenwich Y allowed all local residents to use the showers and bathroom facilities free of charge, said Bob Kalinski, front desk supervisor.

Parents who needed to drop their children off for the day could do so for a nominal charge of \$5, he said.

Cohen said the YMCA should be an asset to its community, and needs to be there when crisis strikes.

"We see ourselves as a vital community service," he said. "It may sound cheesy, but we're dedicated to building strong kids, strong families and strong communities. In times like these, the community part really comes out."

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