

Thank you, Red Cross, thank you

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Landmark healthcare reform legislation was passed in Washington over the weekend; municipal and school officials across New Jersey are banging their heads against the wall after receiving the news of steep cuts in state aid last week; but we could not let this month go by without recognizing that March is "Red Cross Month," honoring an institution that is a saving grace for our communities, our country and the world.

The significance of the month's designation, first proclaimed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, was not lost on Trenton, either, despite the current budget turmoil. "Red Cross Day" was marked at the State House on Monday, March 22, proclaiming March as "Red Cross Month," just as President Barack Obama did a month ago. Representatives from all 15 Red Cross chapters in New Jersey were on hand, including Christy Hodde, executive director of the Colonial Crossroads Chapter, which serves our area.

The Southeast Morris Chapter of the American Red Cross had long served the towns of Madison, the Chathams and Florham Park before 2006, when it merged with the Summit Area Chapter to form the Colonial Crossroads Chapter of the American Red Cross, cutting costs and combining strengths. The merged chapter also serves East Hanover, Long Hill Township, Summit, Berkeley Heights, New Providence and Springfield Township.

The core Red Cross programs were expanded: disaster response; health and safety training; transportation for senior citizens and the disabled; emergency services for members of the armed forces and their families, and those Red Cross blood drives.

Last year, the Colonial Crossroads Chapter held 68 of those blood drives, collecting more than 2,100 units of blood; trained more than 18,000 residents in life-saving skills; provided more than 4,500 rides for senior citizens to keep medical appointments; facilitated 23 emergency communications between members of the military and their families, and loaned some 450 pieces of medical equipment to people recovering from surgeries or accidents.

Volunteers provided the lion's share of these services. Without them, Hodde emphasized, the Red Cross "couldn't touch so many lives."

That was certainly true during a rash of fires in the Chathams in the 2008-09 holiday season, particularly on Christmas night 2008, when a fire left 10 units at the Chatham Hill Apartments on Hickory Place in Chatham Township uninhabitable, and 30 units without electricity.

It was a freezing cold night too for the Green Village and Chatham Township firefighters who spent five hours battling the blaze and securing the building, but the Disaster Action Team (DAT) of the Red Cross was there to help keep them going with a steady supply of hot coffee.

The Red Cross also worked with the property manager to locate all the tenants and attend to their needs. DAT leader Julie Siciliano of Madison noted it was imperative the Red Cross account for all the residents and supply them with food, shelter and medications if necessary.

That's what the Red Cross does. It helps people in a crisis.

This year, during four weeks between January and February, the chapter's DAT was called out to a multi-unit apartment following a fire in Long Hill Township to assist several families left in the bitter cold who

had just lost everything.

Later the team responded to an eight-apartment fire in Springfield Township, providing hotel rooms and financial assistance for 15 residents.

Siciliano, meanwhile, was dispatched to the Jersey Shore to manage shelters after massive power outages during a blizzard.

“Red Cross Month” is traditionally a time when the American Red Cross pays thanks to its volunteers and to all its supporters who make its humanitarian work possible.

We simply want to note: No, Red Cross. Thank you. Thank you.

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