

Absent paychecks, Coasties depending on food pantry

By JACK FICHTER
Cape May Star and Wave

CAPE MAY — As expected, U.S. Coast Guard personnel at Training Center Cape May did not receive a paycheck Jan. 15 due to the partial government shutdown.

Community support continues for a food bank operated by the Jersey Cape Military Spouses Club headed by Jessica Manfre.

She said the Wildwood Elks Club wrote a \$10,000 check to the spouses club food pantry. Manfre said Seven Mile Brewery donated \$5,000 in a drive led by one of its waitresses.

Coast Guard Air Station Atlantic City and Philadelphia Sector are now operating their own food pantries, she said. Manfre said the Cape May pantry has been

sending food to those locations as well.

On Jan. 19, the Chief Petty Officers Association (CPOA) sponsored a food pantry in Delaware for Coast Guard members, Manfre said.

"We sent \$2,000 to the CPOA in Greater Alaska and Anchorage because they are assisting all of the units there, because some of them are in a lot of trouble like Valdez and Cordova, some of the smaller ones that don't have access to any resources," she said. "They are doing pantries; they reached out for assistance, so we were able to help them because of this community."

The Jersey Cape Military Spouses Club still has a need for cold food items such as milk, eggs and meat but is well stocked with dry foods, Manfre said.

"Occasionally there are

specific sizes of diapers we'll run out of but we're pretty good on nonperishables," she added.

Coast Guard members continue to be anxious about when the partial government shutdown will end, she said.

"I don't think anybody is hopeful at this point. I think that everybody is preparing that there won't be a check on Feb. 1," Manfre said.

The Jersey Cape Military Spouses Club has been featured in news reports in the Washington Post and four Philadelphia television stations. Manfre and a fellow sponsor were scheduled for a television interview for the BBC.

"It's important to get our story out there," she said. "The more people that see faces and hear stories, it resonates and maybe that

will make a difference to Congress. It's harder to ignore."

Manfre said she is glad the pantry opened Jan. 1.

"I really think we softened that blow of no pay on the 15th," she said. "We need to help each other, we need to support each other. That's what we're here for. We can't rely on anything else at this point."

Along with Coasties, furloughed civilian Coast Guard base workers are also using the pantry, Manfre said.

The food pantry is also open to civilian employees and furloughed federal employees. From cash donations, 500 \$20 gift cards to be used for gasoline were purchased and distributed to civilian contractors and active duty members, she said.



Jack Fichter/CAPE MAY STAR AND WAVE
Jessica Manfre, who is leading the food drive for the Jersey Cape Military Spouses Club, said there is still a need for cold items such as milk and eggs but that they are well stocked with nonperishable items. As expected, no paychecks were distributed Jan. 15.

Code Blue spat

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announcement. We would encourage the Cape May County Board of Freeholders and the Office of Emergency Management to take a more proactive approach to working with local municipalities in identifying the homeless population, effectuating a plan for notifying those individuals of a Code Blue alert and getting them into an identified shelter."

This statement followed a freeholder meeting Dec. 11 at which Thornton said the municipalities are responsible for providing warming centers.

"Believe me, when you start talking about government in Cape May County, then you're talking about Civil Service and you're talking about rules and regulations and state and federal and everything else," he said at the meeting, which was attended by local social service agencies such as Cape Hope, as well as advocates for the homeless and members of the homeless population.

Thornton said as the county searched for warming center locations, the freeholder's meeting room was filled with residents complaining the county was opening "drug centers."

"Not in my town' is what we get," he said.

Freeholder Jeffrey Pierson said the county was not divesting its responsibility of assisting with homeless people. He said the board makes sure motel vouchers are available each year. Pierson said he believes the amount was about \$65,000 in funds from the state.

"The state has cut off those funds, so what we have done, we have taken that \$65,000 out of our budget and have worked with each of the municipalities to identify areas within their municipality that they can shelter their people on Code Blue nights," Pierson said.

He said nothing has changed except municipalities would provide warming centers.

"It's their responsibility by law, No. 1, and we're trying to just find a mechanism to support them, get them the opportunity to make it right in their community," he said.

The municipalities have the responsibility for Code

Blue, he said. The county Office of Emergency Management issues a Code Blue alert to all municipalities when the temperature is falling to 32 degrees with precipitation and 25 degrees in dry weather, Thornton said.

Single individuals are not given motel vouchers but must go to warming centers, according to Thornton. Pierson said the Social Services hotline can provide the location of warming centers.

"County governments have a lot of leeway in how they address the issue of homelessness in their local communities, and we remain committed to working with local governments to address this pressing issue," the statement from the assemblymen said.

Thornton fired back with allegations of grandstanding for "political points."

"Cape May County has been working over the past year on how to best handle the change in Code Blue funding that was initiated at the state level. There have been multiple meetings with local municipalities that have the largest homeless population in the county," he said. "Andrzejczak was even invited to those meetings with the municipalities, but he was not in attendance. Separately my staff and I have had meetings with him on issues dealing with the homeless population, but at no time did he address any of the concerns regarding how Cape May County was following the law that he and Assemblyman Bruce Land wrote."

"This Code Blue legislation was passed by the state, as many mandates do, without funding. Once the state cut off the funding source the county had been using to help those in need during a Code Blue event, I made

sure we found money in our budget to fund warming centers."

He went on to say the meetings with local municipalities included a training session with Burlington County, which runs a model warming center in the state.

"We are in constant discussions with the local municipalities to see how we can continue to improve this system," Thornton said. "Additionally, our staff has been in constant discussion with other counties in the state and seeing what is being done statewide. Our small

county is doing more than some that are much bigger in size. A simple phone call from him could have provided him with the facts instead of this political grandstanding. These comments also suggest that municipalities are not meeting their responsibility, which is not true.

"I believe this county works best when everyone comes together and works as one to help our residents. We invite other elected officials to engage in the exchange of ideas going forward in a way that can help people and not just to score political points."

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