

# 'Kicking people when they're down:' Port Chester rebuilds after Hurricane Ida amid hardship

*Port Chester is a working class, immigrant community about 60 percent Latino. Its annual per capita of about \$32,000 trails national averages and is about half of Westchester's overall average income.*

**Eduardo Cuevas**

Rockland/Westchester Journal News

Samantha Goyburu's wedding gown drifted on her children's swing set.

Along with her stained dress, Goyburu, 36, tried to salvage the four-decade-old wedding portrait of her mother, Freda Wesley, at their Port Chester home on a sunny Wednesday afternoon.

A week prior, their basement filled with 7 feet of storm water from the remnants of Hurricane Ida that flipped appliances and other belongings that must now be thrown out.

In the days since, Goyburu's husband, Pedro, 37, has tried to bleach mold and rebuild the home he shares with his wife, mother-in-law and two elementary school-age children. They've already lost two cars.

Dumpsters sit outside every home on their avenue.

"Everybody has their lives out on the curbs," Wesley, 73, said.



*Samantha Goyburu salvaged a wedding photo of her mother-in-law, Freda Wesley, when the basement in her home in Port Chester sustained almost seven feet of water due to flooding from Hurricane Ida last week. Goyburu, photographed Sept. 8, 2021, along with her husband and mother, moved all the water damaged contents of their basement into their backyard to dry out.*

The village's Department of Public Works trucks come daily to collect belongings of thousands of residents. At least 2,000 cubic yards have been removed for the 2.2-square-mile village of more than 31,000 people, village officials said.

The family, like many other Port Chester residents, has a GoFundMe to try to get by as they wait for disaster assistance.

In Port Chester, Hurricane Ida hit hard in the working-class, immigrant community that is more than 60 percent Latino. Now, the village must figure out how to stabilize the lives of its residents — many of whom already had precarious conditions before the COVID-19 pandemic and a natural disaster.

## Living needs an immediate concern

At the Carver Center's food distribution on Wednesday afternoon, residents steadily went to get meals at the children's playground behind the Port Chester nonprofit's building. There were new faces for the food distribution, which occurs three times per week.

With the pandemic, meals from the Carver Center spiked. Now, Mike Williams, the logistics coordinator, could tell within the first hour that the sign-in sheet was longer than normal.

"It's kicking people when they're down," said Anne Bradner, the CEO of the Carver Center. "It's going to cost them a lot of money."



*Port Chester resident Maria Puac chooses groceries as she and her son Eddie, 8, visited the Carver Market at the Carver Center in Port Chester, Sept. 8. The Carver Center holds the market every Monday, Wednesday and Friday distributing donated food and household items. They are seeing an increase in people coming to the market after last week's flooding due to Hurricane Ida.*

The center handed out produce and premade meals, as some wait to get appliances replaced or they find a new home.

Port Chester's annual per capita income at just under \$32,000 was close to half that of Westchester County, and trails national averages. The poverty rate surpassed the county and U.S. overall.

Jay Lopez, 23, and Jennifer Alvarado, 24, went to get food for their families.

Like the Goyburus, they knew many Port Chester families who set up GoFundMe pages to try to pay for the losses, though they said their families weren't as hard hit.

During the hurricane, Lopez was working as a volunteer firefighter as the waters rose to his chest as he tried to help Port Chester residents.

But at work, the Rye kitchen where he works as a chef flooded, leaving him unemployed. At home, his basement filled with water.

On Wednesday, he and Alvarado, his high school sweetheart, sought help from the Carver Center, though they said Port Chester remains resilient.

“This was an obstacle, but there ain't much that we can't overcome,” Lopez said. “If we've overcome other stuff, we can definitely overcome this. And if we all work together as a group like what you're seeing right here as a community, I don't see no way we can collapse and fall.”



*Port Chester resident, Olga Vasquez, left, chooses bananas as she packs groceries for herself at the Carver Market at the Carver Center in Port Chester on Sept. 8. The Carver Center holds the market every Monday, Wednesday and Friday distributing donated food and household items. They are seeing an increase in people coming to the market after last week's flooding due to Hurricane Ida.*

Port Chester High School delayed its first day of school after Hurricane Ida to start Thursday.

Principal Luke Sotherden knew families would be more affected by the flooding.

More than 80 percent of students are Latino. Nearly three-quarters of students are economically disadvantaged, and more than one in five are English learners.

“When you couple that with the amount of rain and devastation that took place because of all the flooding, you have some people who were already vulnerable to begin with,” Sotherden said. “And now their lives could be upended.”

Sotherden started going through with faculty to collect toiletries, clothing and some food for families, and distributing them through places like the Carver Center, Sharing Shelf and the Don Bosco Church.

After all, the Salvation Army in Port Chester flooded, spoiling some food. Nearby, the John F. Kennedy Elementary School was also damaged.

## **Aid may be a problem**

FEMA has set up two service centers in Westchester County, though the nearest center for Port Chester residents to get access is in Mamaroneck, a wealthier, predominately white community that also has been devastated by Hurricane Ida.

Port Chester officials said the federal center is too far, especially since many residents don't have cars, and many of those who did have cars lost them to the flooding.

Even so, FEMA assistance only applies to U.S. citizens and certain immigrants with legal status.



*The pantry at the Carver Market at the Carver Center in Port Chester, photographed Sept. 8. The Carver Center holds the market every Monday, Wednesday and Friday distributing donated food and household items. They are seeing an increase in people coming to the market after last week's flooding due to Hurricane Ida.*

In Port Chester, nearly 44 percent of people are foreign-born, according to census estimates. Many in the community are undocumented, which precludes them from federal relief, although they may be eligible for aid through children who have legal status.

Luis Yumbla, a community organizer, said the hurricane didn't affect everyone the same. Port Chester was more adversely impacted.

"A lot of people are living on the street with nothing," he said. "So no, not everyone is in the same boat."

Currently, the Ministerios El Shaddai church has opened its doors as a shelter. Fifteen people, including three families are housed there, though the numbers are expected to increase, Yumbla said.

Overall, Village Manager Stuart Rabin estimated more than 50 people have been displaced, either through basement apartments that flooded, or with homes that lost gas and electricity.

Dr. Cecilia Acosta-Lake's family first moved to Port Chester from Ecuador. She opened her dental practice 15 years ago in the village's downtown, so it was easily accessible for Latino families like hers.



*Peter Goyburu continues to sort through the items damaged by flood waters that were in the basement of his home in Port Chester due to Hurricane Ida last week. Goyburu, photographed on Sept. 8, said his basement sustained almost seven feet of flood water. He, along with his wife, and mother-in-law, who all share the home, moved all the water damaged contents of their basement into their backyard to dry out.*

The area is also in the Byram River's floodplain. Acosta-Lake's first-floor practice flooded with three feet of water.

She lost a \$50,000 CT scanner, other tools and files. She's now serving clients through a friend's dentistry in Mamaroneck until her Port Chester practice gets fixed.

While it affects her business, Acosta-Lake thinks of residents waiting for dental care. Many delayed treatments due to the pandemic.

"It can be detrimental to their health if they don't get attention immediately because some are emergency cases," she said. "That's the reality we're living."

Even after the disaster is fixed, many worried about rents in Port Chester, averaging \$2,281 in August, a six percent increase from the previous year, according to RENTCafe, an apartment listing service.

This could further displace the lower income population that has called the village home.

“These are hardworking people,” Yumbla said. “They want to stay there, in their own place.”

## **More resources**

Here are resources for help in Port Chester:

- Federal disaster assistance: [www.fema.gov/disaster/hurricane-ida](http://www.fema.gov/disaster/hurricane-ida)
- Village of Port Chester: [www.portchesterny.gov](http://www.portchesterny.gov)
- Red Cross: [www.redcross.org](http://www.redcross.org)
- The Carver Center: [carvercenter.org](http://carvercenter.org)
- Meals on Main Street: [caritaspc.org](http://caritaspc.org)
- Ministerios El Shaddai: [elshaddainy.org](http://elshaddainy.org)
- The Sharing Shelf: [www.sharingshelf.org](http://www.sharingshelf.org)
- St. John Bosco Parish: [donboscopc.org](http://donboscopc.org)
- Salvation Army: [www.salvationarmyusa.org](http://www.salvationarmyusa.org)