

Hurricane Matthew slams Southeast

Baton Rouge letter carriers still recovering from summer flooding

After killing hundreds in Haiti and elsewhere in the Caribbean, Hurricane Matthew made landfall in South Carolina on Saturday, Oct. 8, dumping torrential rains on the entire Southeast, causing massive flooding and other damage from Florida through North Carolina. As this issue of *The Postal Record* was being prepared, more than two dozen Americans had died as a result of the storm, more than half of them in North Carolina, where residents were still reeling from the aftermath.

By Oct. 10, volunteers, U.S. marshals and water-rescue crews had used helicopters, boats and massive trucks

Above: A satellite image of Hurricane Matthew over the Southeast United States

Below: Rescue workers in North Carolina

to save people stranded in Lumberton, NC—one of the worst hit areas—after the Lumber River burst its banks, the Associated Press reported. In some locations the flooding had topped the roofs of cars. Many postal facilities were either cut off or flooded and NALC and postal officials were still scrambling to make sure all of the postal workers were safe.

“We can’t get anything in or out,” Lumberton Branch 1670 President Terry Benton said on Oct. 11. “Right now, our guys aren’t even at work. All the roads around Lumberton are still underwater. They can’t even get mail into us.”

He was reaching out through phone calls and social media to the letter carriers in his branch. “They’re spread all over,” he said. “I know one of my carriers, the National Guard came by her house and told her, ‘Leave now or we can’t come back to get you.’”

“So far as I know, all mine are safe and sound.” But, he added, “The river is still rising.”

In Fayetteville, NC, Branch 1128 President Frank Vega said that one of his carriers’ house had flooded, as well, but that the situation was still evolving.

In some cases, the floodwaters in North Carolina were not expected to crest until Oct. 14. Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of customers across the South still didn’t have electricity as this issue went to press. The lights went out for millions of people and businesses after Matthew arrived on the coast. In some cases, it will take weeks to get the power back on, utility companies said.

After the flood

Once the water recedes, the carriers and others in Lumberton and surrounding areas will try to help restore their communities. Troy Scott, president of Baton Rouge, LA Branch 129, knows exactly what they’ll be going through. In August, catastrophic flooding devastated south Louisiana, killing 13 people and causing \$8.7 billion in damage, according to the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

“The city got 25 inches of rain in a three-day period,” Scott said, “and it had been raining pretty much all week. But that Friday evening, we started having flooding in the outlying regions. Saturday, the outer suburbs saw flooding as well. By Sunday morning, it was a catastrophe. Places that had never flooded before were underwater.”



In the city, the sewer lines flooded, pushing sewage up and into peoples' homes. Many also lost power for several days.

"Very few homes had more than four feet of water," Scott said. "But two feet of water inside your home destroys the drywall, the carpet, the hardwood floors. It's devastating. The furniture is ruined. And because it's so hot here, the mold spreads."

But some of the worst damage wasn't done to the structure or the furniture of the house. "Most of the keepsakes and photographs in drawers and on dressers and stuff like that [are ruined]," he explained. "You're talking about throwing away your life."

FEMA reported that more than 134,000 households registered for aid. By the end of September, the Postal Emergency Relief Fund (PERF) had received claims from more than 180 postal employees, including about 60 coming from NALC members.

PERF helps active and retired postal employees, both management and craft, whose homes, as a result of a major natural disaster, were completely destroyed or left uninhabitable—displacing the postal employees and their families for an extended time. The fund is governed by postal employee and management groups and provides small relief grants to help qualifying victims of such circumstances re-establish residence and to help replenish basic necessities in the aftermath of a devastating loss.

Once the Baton Rouge residents got back into their houses, they had to work fast. "You have to take the sheetrock out up to the first four feet," Scott said. "Then you have to leave the studs exposed and use dehumidifiers and fans to get the humidity out of the house."

Scott credits the Postal Service for helping letter carriers deal with their personal property, bringing in carriers

from New Orleans to cover routes while the Baton Rouge carriers use leave to work on their houses. "It wasn't just a craft issue," he added. "Managers got flooded as well."

In a neighboring parish, the post office remained closed two months later, forcing carriers to travel 20 miles from their homes to the temporary office, 20 miles back to their routes, 20 miles back to the station and then 20 miles back home. It's taking a toll, Scott said.

Also two months later, most of the homeowners were still working on their homes or waiting for contractors to get started. They can't live in the houses while the work is going on. Scott, whose home hadn't flooded, took in an 81-year-old retired carrier and his wife, whose house had flooded. The hope is that most residents will be back in their homes by Christmas.

"We tried to help the retired carriers," Scott said of the branch. "The fact that we came really touched them; that someone thought about them."

He offers advice to those experiencing flooding from Hurricane Matthew and those who might face a similar situation in the future. "Try to get people going in the cleanup process as soon as possible," he said. "That's the difference between this and Katrina. With Katrina, they didn't let the people get back to their homes for 30 days. We were able to get back to our home in two to three days. That made a difference in what could be saved."

For postal workers, he has some specific advice. "Have EAP [the Employee Assistance Program] come out," he said. "Have a listening ear. Get the PERF applications out ASAP. Those are the things that are going to make a tangible difference."

"Sometimes it's just letting them know that someone cares for them," he said. **PR**



Above: An aerial image of the Baton Rouge flooding in August

Below: A Baton Rouge letter carrier's house in a historic no-flood zone

