

Hurricanes taking a toll on letter carriers

Carriers in Puerto Rico, St. Thomas and parts of Florida pick up the pieces

In Puerto Rico, reeling from the pounding from Hurricanes Irma and Maria that left most residents without electricity or internet and facing roads full of traffic and debris, an astonishing 688 of San Juan's 690 letter carriers have reported back to work. In little-noted ways, they are providing hope and even saving lives.

On the U.S. Virgin Islands' St. Thomas, where residents are desperate to find batteries and cooking gas and drinking water, letter carriers' determination to deliver their routes provides a rare bright spot.

Christina Plimpton had no sooner won South Florida Branch 1071's charitable drawing on Sept. 20 than the 29-year letter carrier declined the money. "Just write a check to our brothers and sisters in Branch 818," she declared, preferring to help fellow letter carriers in the Florida Keys recover from Hurricane Irma.

hit hardest, the combination of fierce winds and too much water destroyed homes and infrastructure.

Amid the destruction—and, in some places, the despair—letter carriers have stepped up.

In Florida, for example, when letter carriers in the Keys or in Naples suffered extensive property losses, were forced to evacuate or couldn't get to work on washed-out roads, co-workers from across the state came to their aid with donations, and in the case of the Keys, also by delivering routes for them.

"I expected people to respond, but not as generously as they did," **Anthony Ali**, vice president of the Florida State Association and Central Florida Branch 1091 member, said. "But letter carriers never cease to amaze me."

Or consider Puerto Rico, where Martin Caballero, USPS district marketing manager for the Caribbean District, has watched letter carriers use their unique knowledge of the island to help emergency officials locate elderly or injured residents.

"They're doing the best they can with personal sacrifice—family and homes that have been affected by the storm," Caballero told *The Postal Record*. "As far as I'm concerned, they are our heroes."

Puerto Rico

The back-to-back pounding of Puerto Rico by hurricanes Irma and Maria has been well-chronicled, as has the desperate plight its 3.5 million U.S. citizens face.

The recovery, as we know, has been slowed by the difficulty in getting necessities such as water and food to the island and distributing them, as well as by an electrical system—and an

economy—that were challenged even before the storms hit.

Full restoration of electricity, plus cell phone and internet service, may be months off—and, in rural areas, a year or more away. Only a sliver of the population, concentrated in the capital, San Juan, currently has power.

But amid the turmoil, Puerto Rico's letter carriers quietly are playing a salutary role:

- By showing up and doing their jobs, they provide a rare sign of normalcy—and of hope—for struggling Puerto Ricans.
- By delivering the mail, they offer one of the few ways to communicate these days on an island roughly the size of Connecticut.
- By using their practical knowledge of how to navigate the island and reach residents who may be in dire straits, and sharing that with emergency workers, they help save lives.

A conversation with San Juan Branch 869 President **John Kennedy Rivera**—when the cell phone connection permits—reveals a roller coaster of emotions providing a glimpse into life on the island.

You hear the frustration in Rivera's voice as he navigates the glacial traffic between Branch 869's union hall and the highway to go home. A 12-hour stretch of sustained hurricane winds of 160 to 185 mph—with gusts in some places reaching 225 mph—reduced three routes to one and broke two bridges.

But ask him about Puerto Rico's letter carriers, and his tone changes markedly.

"Do you know how many letter carriers are missing? I have 690 active members, and only two are missing—and one of them is on workers' comp. The rest of the people are working."



An LLV makes its way through Big Pine Key, FL.

These snapshots reflect the varied roles being played by letter carriers as they cope with, and help others cope with, the impact of this intense hurricane season.

Hurricanes Irma and Maria didn't bring the enormous flooding that Hurricane Harvey brought to Texas' Gulf Coast, but in the areas Irma and Maria



A letter carrier delivers through the devastation on the island of Puerto Rico.

That's the case even though about 75 carriers' homes were destroyed or heavily damaged, and despite the need for some dramatic rescues, including a carrier who made it to her roof when her house was underwater, before the National Guard brought her to safety.

Ponce Branch 826, the smaller of Puerto Rico's two branches, is harder to reach because most power on the island is in San Juan. The Region 15 national business agent's office said that Branch 826 President **Efrain Colombani** has communicated that his members are accounted for but that most "have suffered really heavy [property] damage."

Ask Rivera why virtually all his letter carriers are working, and he says: "Seventy-two percent of the letter carriers in Puerto Rico are military veterans, and no matter what, we report and we do our jobs."

"Letter carriers, we just have a commitment with the people of Puerto Rico. Management, in the first three days [after the second storm hit] said we can't deliver mail; it was too dangerous. But letter carriers are the ones who pushed the issue. They said, 'No, we want to get to the streets.' The people screamed 'Yay' when they saw them, big applause, because they felt like the country's running again."

A reporter with the Reuters news agency recently wrote that with Puerto Rico's "power grid shredded by Hurricane Maria, the U.S. Postal Service has taken the place of cellphone service at the forefront of island communications."

Letter carriers also are alerting the Federal Emergency Management

Agency's disaster relief office in San Juan about sick or elderly patients, so medical assistance can be provided.

In a San Juan suburb, the Reuters reporter heard a FEMA worker tell USPS manager Caballero, "It's been a clutch situation, and you guys have totally come through." The worker then told Reuters that "the mail carriers are the only ones who really have the exact addresses."

Without internet, Caballero hadn't seen the story, but when it was read to him over the phone, he called letter carriers "heroes," and added: "Naturally, when the customers see that postal truck running down the street, there's some sense of normalcy: 'We got the post office back again.' The Postal Service is a community organization that binds the nation together."

San Juan Branch President Rivera, an Army veteran of Operation Desert Storm, was pleased to hear of the comments by FEMA and by Caballero—but said it's all part of the job.

"For us, it's normal. We're proud, but it's normal," Rivera said.

Florida

Irma, initially a hurricane of historic size, was projected to slam Florida's East Coast, subsequently projected to instead travel up Florida's center and blanket the state, then projected to ravage the state's West Coast with storm surges.

The shifting predictions created confusion; some people sought shelter on the state's West Coast, only to return to their homes or head north to Georgia once the warnings changed.

As it turned out, none of those

predictions materialized, as Irma lost steam—but only after inflicting heavy damage on the Florida Keys, at the state's southernmost tip, and then on the West Coast's Naples and nearby Marco Island.

"It could have been worse if the hurricane went up the center of Florida, as predicted," Region 9 NBA **Kenny Gibbs** said.

While much of Florida breathed a sigh of relief as Irma left, residents of



Above: Florida State Association President Al Friedman (l) and Vice President Anthony Ali gather supplies to deliver to carriers in need in the Florida Keys.

Below: A carrier who lost everything in the hurricane receives some donated supplies.

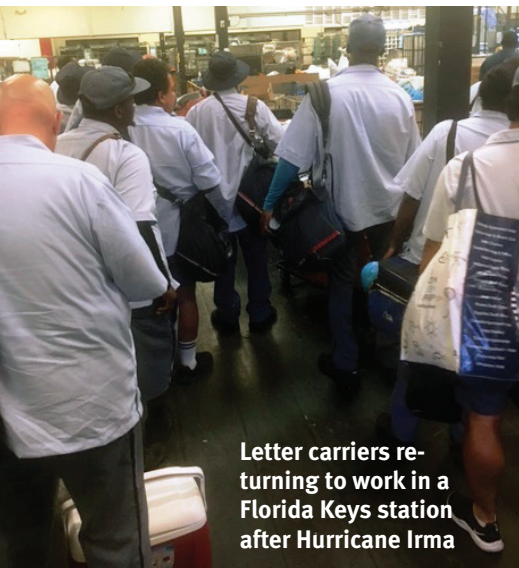


the Keys instead worried about recovering, including **Janet Jones**, president of Key West Branch 818.

Throughout most of the South Florida District, which includes the major population center of Miami, postal operations ceased on Sept. 8, a Friday; letter carriers were called back to work the following Tuesday.

But in the Keys, which belong to the same postal district, mail delivery was shut down from Sept. 5 to Sept. 15, given the intense pounding of the storm and the storm surge that hit the low-lying Keys.

“It was bad, horrible, down there,” NBA Gibbs said. “[Jones’s] branch was the worst hit.”



Letter carriers re-turning to work in a Florida Keys station after Hurricane Irma

Jones said several of her 70 members lost their homes and don’t know yet what will happen regarding insurance and their ability to rebuild.

Irma was particularly intense in Big Pine Key, where tornadoes were reported. A letter carrier’s roof was blown off and the ceilings collapsed. “Everything’s ruined, his furniture, clothes,”



A damaged structure in Key West

Jones said. “It’s full of mold and has been condemned, even though it was on stilts. He lost basically everything, but as soon as letter carriers were called back to work, he went to work.”

In Ramrod Key, a “condemned” sign hangs on a letter carrier’s house, but with nowhere to go—hotels won’t allow his dogs—he’s living on his second floor. He’s bleached the house out and awaits the insurance adjuster.

In Baypoint Key, another carrier lost her roof, but “thankfully, one of her customers put her up,” Jones said. The customer, a “snowbird,” offered her condo while the carrier’s house gets repaired.

In Big Pine, Marathon and Summerland keys, post offices were destroyed and activities are being carried out in tents or temporary buildings.

Irma then hit Naples, where mandatory evacuations had been ordered for areas near the Gulf of Mexico, about one-third of households, as well as Marco Island.

Though most of the 220 branch members fared relatively well, Naples Branch 4716 Vice President **Matt Naufel** said that delivering the mail “was another story.”

“Only 14 percent of the carriers could make it to work” the first day back, a Tuesday, with property damage to homes, flooded streets and downed utility lines. On Wednesday, 33 percent of carriers reported to work, and by Saturday, it was close to 90 percent.

Some mailboxes were inaccessible or had been blown away. In two condo communities near the beach, mail delivery ceased for at least a month after mold took over the mailrooms. Meanwhile, several post

offices weren’t functioning, and on Marco Island, postal employees had to work for a week in the parking lot, with letter carriers sorting mail in the backs of their trucks.

As in the Keys, letter carriers helped each other with clothes, rides, yard work and more. One Naples letter carrier who acted selflessly paid a price.

Ted Presti, an 11-year letter carrier with Branch 4716, hosted 10 people and four dogs from Naples’s flood-prone areas in his two-story townhouse—three letter carriers and a postal clerk along with four relatives, as well as two other people seeking shelter from the storm.

The day after the hurricane, they left to assess the damage to their own homes. But that evening, alone in a dark house with no electricity, as Presti headed downstairs carrying sheets and pillows to prepare for their return, he slipped, fell down the stairs and broke his foot.

Lacking cellphone service, he had to crawl to his car and drive himself to the hospital; a police officer stopped him because of a curfew but then let him continue. The best-case scenario is recovery within four to six months; worst case is nine months to a year.

But Presti, Customer Connect coordinator at Naples’s Main Post Office and a former shop steward who is active in the annual Food Drive, says he plans to continue to help others in need.

“It’s just the right thing to do,” he said. “I’m not going to turn my back on them when we’ve got the storm coming and they live in a flood area and I don’t live in a flood area.”

An interesting dynamic of the Florida situation is that many areas that braced for the worst, only to be spared, have rallied to the aid of carriers in the Keys and Naples. In addition,



Left: Hurricane Irma's winds and flooding hit St. Thomas. Above: Carriers and postal workers are forced to work outside at the post office because of the damage.

Miami letter carriers remember the devastation Hurricane Andrew brought 25 years ago, and how letter carriers elsewhere in the state helped out.

"So when it's somebody else, we know what they're going through and we want to help them," South Florida Branch 1071 President **Mark Travers** said. The 5,300-member Miami branch contributed heavily to its neighboring South Florida District Keys branch, with which it has a big-brother relationship.

In both the Keys and Naples, branch officers say their members have received welcome support from carriers statewide, including donated clothing, uniforms, food, toiletries, paper products, tarps, kids' bicycles, money and more.

Travers and officers of other branches credit the coordinating efforts of the Florida State Association, led by President **Al Friedman** and Vice President Ali.

Ali enlisted branches in the effort and identified the needs of letter carriers in hard-hit areas. Friedman, meanwhile, got district postal officials on board, including securing the green light from the district manager overseeing the Keys.

Meanwhile, busloads of letter carriers from South Florida, including many city carrier assistants, traveled to the Keys for a week at a time to deliver the mail. The volunteers, who lived in tents during their stint, let the regular letter carriers focus on family needs while assuring that residents received their mail.

The outpouring has boosted morale while filling material needs.

"Carriers have been pitching in from all over Florida, in a time of crisis," Keys Branch President Jones noted, adding: "Just thank everybody. Everybody was very kind and generous."

St. Thomas

Every day on the route since the two hurricanes hit presents a challenge for St. Thomas letter carrier **Lawson Pinney**, starting with bumper-to-bumper traffic as residents seek basic supplies from nearly empty stores with endless lines of their own. They know they have to beat the daily curfew or risk being locked up.

They probably won't find the household items they need, but the 22-year carrier and Charlotte Amalie Branch 6412 member knows that receiving their mail provides some solace, even if it's mostly backed-up mail.

Residents on St. Thomas lack internet, electricity and clean water.

"We have a projected date of Christmas to get power back," said **Vera Joyce Thomas-Pinney**, president of Branch 6412, with 21 active letter carriers and eight retirees.

Many carriers are still assessing damage to their houses—there's plenty of water and mold—but Thomas-Pinney said she knows of no injuries among her members.

Meanwhile, Thomas-Pinney and her letter carrier husband, Lawson, have no power, running water, batteries, propane gas or candles to protect against mosquitoes.

Asked if residents are desperate, she downplays things: "We're from the Caribbean islands, and some of us were raised without these accommodations. I say, 'OK, it's bad,' but there's nothing we can do right now."

But then her brave face gives way.

"Yes, we have desperate people. There's no way to listen to the news, unless people have a portable battery-operated radio," she said. "There are

lines at the stores, gasoline stations, banks, ATMs. We have lines every place."

When finally able to get to her office, a room at the post office, she found it full of mold. The post office itself lost its back wall.

All hospital patients on the island were sent to the mainland, after the lone hospital suffered storm damage.

Pinney can't change all this, but he can at least deliver the mail.

"They are happy to see us," Pinney said. And these days, he knows, that's no small thing.

PERF

NALC President Fredric Rolando called on the nation's letter carriers to be generous as recovery proceeds, especially in the Caribbean, where returning to normal could take a year or more. "I'm always impressed by how eagerly letter carriers step up to help in times of need," he said. "It's a large part of what makes us proud to be union." (See President's Message, Page 1.)

You can help by donating to the Postal Employees' Relief Fund (PERF), the special charitable organization operated by the various union and management organizations of the Postal Service to benefit postal employees. PERF provides relief grants to help qualifying individuals get re-established after their homes have been significantly damaged by natural disasters or house fires. Charitable donations from letter carriers are needed now.

Direct donations by check or money order can be sent to PERF, P.O. Box 7630, Woodbridge, VA 22195-7630; to contribute online by credit card, go to postalrelief.com. **PR**