

Back to the future of solidarity



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The story of NALC is the story of an ever-expanding circle of solidarity. That solidarity started in the 1860s, long before we created a national union. In those early years, in cities and towns across America, letter carriers created mutual benefit societies that focused on providing support to sick and injured letter carriers when they could not work.

This need to look out for each other was essential in our pre-collective-bargaining period. It remains essential today—and now it extends to *all* U.S. letter carriers, no matter where we live. The series of destructive hurricanes that ravaged parts

of the United States in September and October makes this clear. Hundreds and perhaps thousands of our fellow letter carriers need our help. Right now.

Harvey. Irma. Maria. Nate. These hurricanes have devastated communities in Texas, Florida, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands and other states along the Gulf of Mexico.

I am sure that many members have given what they can to various relief organizations. And, of course, as federal taxpayers, we are all doing our part to fund the national relief effort—and we thank the federal employees of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the Departments of Homeland Security and Defense, the National Weather Service and many other agencies for all of their incredible work over the past few months.

But formal relief efforts can do only so much for Americans who have lost their homes, their cars, their clothes, their family mementos and so much more as a result of the hurricanes. These efforts are vital, but for millions of our fellow citizens, the road to recovery will be a long and hard one. They will need more help.

The situation in Puerto Rico, home to 3.4 million U.S. citizens, is especially grim. It was hit by two Category 5 hurricanes within two weeks (Irma and Maria). As we go to print this month, nearly 90 percent of the island's residents still have no electricity. Nearly half lack drinkable water. Two-thirds of the cell phone towers remain inoperable.

I'm happy to say that almost all of the territory's post offices are up and running again. Our members are heroically serving their fellow Puerto Ricans at this time of crisis, even

as they face their own devastating losses. By doing so, they have restored the only truly universal communication service our country has.

So what can the rest of us do for the states and U.S. territories affected by the hurricanes? At a minimum, we can focus our efforts on our fellow union members.

That's exactly what our labor movement is doing. On Oct. 3, the AFL-CIO organized an amazing airlift of 300 nurses, doctors, dockworkers, heavy machinery operators, truck drivers and other workers to participate in relief efforts in Puerto Rico. These volunteers were recruited by their respective unions. The AFL-CIO also coordinated fundraising efforts among the millions of Americans who belong to unions to assist union households in all of the affected regions.

NALC answered the call by making financial contributions to the relief funds set up by the state labor federations in Texas and Florida and to the Union Community Fund, a charitable arm of the AFL-CIO, which will use the money collected to direct aid to union members in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Several members, branches and state associations also have provided direct assistance to members in our Caribbean branches.

Each and every letter carrier can also make contributions to the Postal Employees' Relief Fund (PERF). PERF was set up in 1990 to help postal families who have suffered personal losses due to natural disasters. It was established by the Postal Service, its unions and other employee organizations and was designed to provide just the kind of long-term relief that the victims of the recent hurricanes will need after initial short-term assistance from FEMA, the Red Cross and insurance companies runs out. We can make a huge difference if a large number of our 284,000 active and retired members give just a little bit. Visit nalc.org/perf to make a contribution today.

Finally, I believe it may be time for NALC to consider building some capacity to provide immediate assistance to NALC members following future natural disasters. I can imagine developing a protocol for mobilizing resources and coordinating immediate actions to help members in conjunction with NALC branches in affected areas. In the near future, we will convene a meeting of emergency planning experts and branch leaders with recent crisis-relief experience to discuss ways that NALC could fill in some of the gaps left by other relief efforts.

Please do what you can to help your fellow Americans and fellow letter carriers hurt by the hurricanes. In the best NALC tradition, let's once again expand the circle of solidarity.