

NALC Disaster Relief Foundation aids Hurricane Michael survivors

“It’s like a bomb went off.” That’s how Panama City, FL Branch 3367 President **Art Ness Jr.** described his Florida Panhandle city a few weeks after Hurricane Michael slammed into the coast on Oct. 10.

The storm left many residents of the Gulf Coast stranded because it intensified so quickly, Ness said. Many residents were prepared to ride out a weaker storm, but by the time it reached Category 4 status (with 155 mph sustained winds, Michael’s strength was just shy of Category 5), the window for evacuation closed fast.

“At night it turned into a Category 3 and you wake up in the morning and it’s a Category 4. It caught a lot of people by surprise,” Ness said. “By then, in the morning, it was too late to leave.” Ness already was out of town, but his mother was stuck in the path of the storm (her Panama City home was damaged but she is fine). He returned as soon as he could and was among the letter carriers who managed to get back to work only days later.

“The hurricane hit on Wednesday,” he said. “There were some back to work on Saturday, some back on Sunday, and then a lot of carriers were back to work on Monday—which is incredible. No power, no water—it’s hard at the same time when you’ve lost a lot and your friends and family have lost a lot.”

Though he hasn’t learned of any deaths or serious injuries among postal employees, some haven’t returned to work because they have nowhere to live nearby, he said. “There are a few employees who lost everything,” Ness said. “They don’t have any friends or family here but they have family elsewhere, out of the city or out of state, so that’s where they are.”



NALC Disaster Relief Foundation

Make a donation by sending a check or money order to NALC Disaster Relief Foundation, 100 Indiana Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20001-2144.

Michael was the strongest tropical storm on record to hit the Panhandle, and as of late October, the death toll stood at 35 in Florida, with an additional 10 in other states—one in Georgia, three in North Carolina and six in Virginia. The eye of the storm hit the area with winds from two directions, increasing the devastation.

“People’s houses are damaged, missing roofs, water came in—or their homes are just gone,” Ness said. “They’re saying nine or 10 tornadoes came up after; whoever wasn’t damaged enough really got hit. They’ve had to rebuild the entire power grid, the electrical infrastructure from the ground up. The power poles snapped.” Loss of power for street lights caused traffic jams.

“We had people from all over coming down to help us out and rebuild, like the linemen, people cutting trees,” Ness said, “and they said they’ve never been to a place like this before.”

In the immediate wake of the storm, more than a dozen post offices in the Panhandle were closed or offering limited service due to damage. Many carriers shifted to working from other

postal facilities to keep deliveries moving.

By quickly resuming mail service, the letter carriers of the Florida Panhandle provided more than mail—they brought hope.

“When I started delivering Monday, I had people literally jumping up and down,” Ness said. “They couldn’t believe it. We were already out there delivering.” Many residents of the area rely on vital mail deliveries such as medication.

And as they always do, letter carriers across the country donated money, supplies and labor to help their fellow postal employees working and living in the disaster zone.

As part of an initiative by the new NALC Disaster Relief Foundation, several letter carriers brought relief supplies to the Panhandle. NALC created the Disaster Relief Foundation in response to NALC members who had asked for a way to donate directly to fellow letter carriers in need.

The NALC Disaster Relief Foundation deployed to the Hurricane Michael disaster area delivering vital items—including bottled water, food and uni-

Some of the destruction from Hurricane Michael



forms—to postal facilities, providing critically needed supplies to our sister and brother letter carriers.

“That was awesome, because when we came into work, instead of having to hunt down supplies and wait in lines, the NALC brought the supplies to us personally,” Ness said. “The letter carriers were able to work and take home what supplies they needed for ourselves and for our families.

“NALC really stepped up to help their own, and I’m really appreciative of that,” he added. “We’re still grabbing supplies and taking them home.”

West Coast Florida Branch 1477 President **Joe Henschen** was one of the volunteer carriers who responded with NALC’s disaster relief mission. With Florida State Association President **Al Friedman** and Branch 1477 Second Vice President **Tom Phillips**, Henschen brought the first wave of relief supplies—some donated, some purchased with cash donations—to letter carriers in the affected area, by rented trucks.

“We took the trucks because we’re close,” Henschen said. “We grabbed every bit of supplies we could from our area and then added to it with a big Costco purchase and headed up that way.

“We took five pallets of bottled water purchased by the Disaster Relief Foundation and another three pallets full of supplies,” he said, “everything from lanterns and batteries to food and toiletries.”

They dropped the supplies at the general mail facility in Panama City, where some carriers were working from because their post offices had been damaged in the storm. To assure that letter carriers had easy access to the supplies, Henschen’s team, with authorization from the postmaster, put supplies in the break room so carriers

could see and take them as needed.

Henschen said that the carriers appreciated their efforts and worked hard to help bring normal mail service to the area even as they dealt with their own setbacks.

“You know half of them had blue tarps on their roofs. I’m told they lost at least three houses,” he said. “The carriers were positive and grateful and did everything to make us feel welcome while they were at home with their families without power, which is tough to deal with.”

A disaster relief team consisting of Special Assistant to the President for Community Service **Christina Vela Davidson**; former NALC Executive Vice President **Gary Mullins** of Wichita Falls, TX Branch 1227; and Alabama State Association President **Antonia Shields** provided supplies and other resources from the Disaster Relief Foundation to letter carriers in the affected area.

The team reached out by phone to attempt to contact them to ensure they were safe, assess their needs and plan to provide them with help. About six carriers could not be reached, so the team went to their homes to check on them.

The team brought water, food and tarps to cover damaged roofs. It also brought support in the form of applications with instructions that those affected could use to apply for assistance from other resources, such as the Postal Service’s Employee Assistance Program (EAP). And, of course, the team members provided moral support just by being there.

“Some people needed help, and others just needed to talk,” Davidson said.

“It humbles you,” Davidson said of visiting the disaster area. “You see people with all their stuff on the side of the

road—their wedding albums, their baby furniture—and now they have to decide whether to throw these things away. It makes your own problems feel small.”

Lori Butler was one of the letter carriers the team checked on. Butler, president of Port St. Joe, FL Branch 5201, lives in Mexico Beach, FL—a town about 25 miles southeast of Panama City that was dubbed “Ground Zero” after Michael ripped through it and left a trail of devastation. High winds combined with a storm surge estimated to have reached 20 feet completely wiped out a number of homes in Mexico Beach and damaged many others.

Butler and her family fled the town before Michael came, the first time the longtime Floridian has evacuated instead of riding out a storm. “This one, we just knew we needed to go,” she said. Her family had to wait more than a week before authorities would allow them back into Mexico Beach to see what had happened to their home.

“It was in better shape than a lot of people’s in Mexico Beach—it was still standing,” she said. The wind had damaged the roof and the storm surge had found its way in, leaving a foot of standing water. “We’re very fortunate compared to others in our area,” Butler said. “Many of our friends’ homes were completely taken off their foundations.”

Butler’s husband and oldest son were at the home cleaning up when the NALC disaster relief team arrived—she was back to work and out on her route. The family is renting a home owned by a fellow postal employee located in a town nearby while they repair their Mexico Beach house.

“I was very happy that they checked on me,” Butler said. “It’s nice to have somebody reach out.”



The wildfires in California have destroyed 23 carriers' homes as of press time.

Wildfires threaten California carriers

As this issue of *The Postal Record* was going to press, reports from the devastating wildfires in California were still coming in as firefighters battled the blazes. The fires have killed at least 77 people and left more than a thousand missing, with thousands more homeless and jobless.

As of Nov. 19, all city letter carriers were accounted for, Region 1 Regional Administrative Assistant Calvin Brookins said. However, at least 23 city carriers have lost their homes in the Paradise and Chico, CA areas—both of which were affected by the massive Camp Fire—and the number may rise.

NALC is reaching out to the homeless letter carriers to check on their welfare and assure that they receive the assistance they need, Brookins said. Most have been contacted.

As soon as the fires cleared, letter carriers quickly resumed operations as best they could. Several postal facilities were damaged or rendered unusable. The Paradise Post Office was largely undamaged by the fire, but it is located in an evacuation area and could not be accessed. Eleven city routes at the Paradise facility were being delivered from the Chico Midtown station.

Brookins said smoke from the remaining fires was severe for a couple of days but then receded enough for letter carriers to deliver safely while wearing masks. The smoke affected air quality in a wide area of the region south of the Camp Fire extending as far as the San Francisco Bay area. In fact, for a while parts of California were reported to have the worst air quality anywhere in the world.

"The Postal Service is supplying everybody with masks," Brookins said. He has checked with branches to ensure that all carriers working in areas affected by smoke have masks available.

The NALC Disaster Relief Foundation already has begun responding by providing uniforms and sharing information about grant availability. Branches or members wishing to donate funds to the Disaster Relief Foundation may do so now by sending a check or money order to NALC Disaster Relief Foundation, 100 Indiana Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20001-2144. Donations are not currently tax deductible, but the foundation is applying for tax-exempt status.

The Postal Record will provide full coverage of the fires and aftermath in the January issue. **PR**

NALC announced the establishment of the Disaster Relief Foundation at the 2018 NALC Convention in Detroit this past summer.

The foundation will help fill a need identified by many branches in the face of natural disasters, including wildfires and hurricanes such as those that struck many parts of the country last year. These branches requested a central location to donate money and supplies to help their fellow carriers.

"That's why we created this foundation," NALC President Fredric Rolando said, "to reflect the will of the members and make it easy for them to help others in need quickly and efficiently."

The foundation will provide both hands-on relief from trained letter carrier volunteers, including delivery of supplies and donated items, and financial grants from donations. All donations will go to members in need—no administrative costs will be deducted from donations. Its first mission was sending volunteer letter carriers to help with relief efforts for victims of Hurricane Florence, which struck the coast of North Carolina in September.

Response teams will go to areas affected by natural disasters to deliver and distribute supplies, help with recovery efforts and offer emotional support.

Letter carriers facing hardship caused by a natural disaster also may apply for financial support. The foundation's board will choose eligible individuals as funds are available.

Branches or members wishing to donate funds to the Disaster Relief Foundation may do so now by sending a check or money order to NALC Disaster Relief Foundation, 100 Indiana Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20001-2144. Online donations soon will be accepted. Donations are not currently tax-deductible, but the foundation is applying for tax-exempt status.

The Disaster Relief Foundation board of directors met at NALC Headquarters in Washington, DC, in November to set up the organization's structure and policies, including the process for providing grants to letter carriers affected by natural disasters. The president is Davidson, with NALC Director of Safety and Health Manuel Peralta Jr. serving as vice president and Shields as secretary-treasurer. The other members of the board are Los Angeles Branch 24 Recording Secretary **Anita Guzik**, Detroit Branch 1 President **Sandy Laemmel**, Mullins, Nalcrest trustee **Matty Rose** of South Florida Branch 1071 and **Richard Thurman** of St. Louis, MO Branch 343.

Among the resolutions the board adopted was that "One hundred percent of all donations received from letter carriers, branches and state associations will solely be used for letter carriers only." **PR**