

Helping carriers hit by hurricanes Ian and Fiona



Supplies being loaded to deliver to letter carriers in the hardest hit areas in Florida

Florida State Association President Al Friedman (c), NALC Assistant to the President for Community Services Christina Vela Davidson (r) and NALC Disaster Relief Foundation board member Gary Mullins help bring needed supplies to the letter carriers affected by Hurricane Ian.



We all watched or read reports of the widespread devastation wrought by hurricanes Ian and Fiona as they traversed Florida and the Carolinas, or Puerto Rico, respectively.

The scenes were overwhelming—historic storm surges; massive flooding; streets turned into rivers and parking lots into lakes; ferocious winds; destroyed homes and cars and boats tossed around like toys; towns largely demolished; extended power outages; and, worst of all, about 150 fatalities.

Letter carriers, both professionally and personally, bore their share of the impact. Deliveries were affected by flooding and fallen trees, by an absence of mail to deliver or mailboxes to deliver to, by damaged post offices, or by an absence of gasoline and power. Though carriers fortunately avoided the worst,

many sustained varying levels of property damage.

Situation in Florida

“Everybody is 100 percent accounted for in the letter carriers,” Florida State Association of Letter Carriers President **Al Friedman** reports.

Yet, hundreds of carriers have damaged homes and belongings, Friedman, also president of Clearwater Branch 2008, said. About a dozen carriers

were left homeless as the powerful hurricane traveled up Florida’s west coast, then cut eastward across the state on its way north to the Carolinas.

“We had a 10- to 12-foot surge coming in Fort Myers,” Friedman said. “Everyone said it’s the closest thing to having a tsunami, that it was the epicenter of the eye of the hurricane.”

A Fort Myers post office “was completely destroyed by water,” and will have to be torn down, he added. “They had to consolidate deliveries from another local post office. The question becomes, what do you deliver to? It’s mostly destroyed.”

Fort Myers has one of the area’s biggest processing plants, and it, too, was shut down, so some processing had to be moved to areas around Orlando and Tampa.

After the storm surge and heavy rain in several areas, rivers overflowed their banks, further complicating mail service already reeling from the lack of power and gasoline, which hindered delivery of needed postal supplies to offices.

The state association provided Florida’s 30 largest branches with a list of supplies needed by carriers in hard-hit areas. Meanwhile, branches in Tampa, St. Petersburg and Clearwater, plus the state association, contributed a total of \$4,000, allowing Tampa Branch 599 President **Tony Diaz**, West Coast Florida Branch 1477 President **Joe Henschen** and Friedman to buy food and other products requested by carriers and transport them in a U-Haul to post offices and union halls.

Often overlooked, Friedman said, is that while letter carriers try to return to work quickly to “bring a sense of normalcy” to residents, with restaurants and stores closed, “there’s no place for them to eat.”

Stephen Weir ventured out into the flood waters brought on by Hurricane Ian.



Others pitched in. The Teamsters delivered 30 pallets of ice in two tractor trucks so carriers could keep perishables cold. Farm Share, a food pantry in Miami that Friedman has worked with on the Stamp Out Hunger food drive, trucked in pallets of bottles of water to offices in Naples, Fort Myers and Port Charlotte. “They felt the need to help us back,” he said.

Damage to cars exacerbated matters. One Fort Myers carrier had to take a two-hour bus from Fort Myers to Fort Lauderdale to get the closest rental car available to get to work.

A visit by NALC Disaster Relief Fund (DRF) board member **Gary Mullins**, a former NALC executive vice president, buoyed local letter carriers, because the arrival of union officers from outside showed them they weren’t alone. Christina Vela Davidson, DRF president and assistant to the president for community services, worked with CVS to provide \$20,000 worth of needed supplies for the members and the local community.

The area around Fort Myers bore the brunt of Ian, prompting Branch 2072 President **Abel Muniz** to ascertain the

needs of the branch’s letter carriers and “make sure carriers’ concerns were addressed” by postal officials. He’s also focused on “making sure we can account for folks, making sure they’re OK.”

Among them: **Stephen Weir**, a 29-year letter carrier whose single-family home took on water after being battered by 3-foot waves from a nearby lake. “We didn’t know how high it was going to get,” Weir said. Outside, water in the street was “up to my chest.” He sought refuge on his neighbors’ second floor, where he spent eight hours. Now Weir, helped by his brother and father—all experienced in drywall and the trades—is repairing his house.

Kirt Sullivan, a West Coast Florida Branch 1477 member who carried mail for 31 years, fared less well. “Wind and surge water inundated the house and my truck,” he said. “The floors just fell apart throughout the whole place. The carport was blown away. You can stand in the driveway and just smell the mold.”

Central Florida also was whacked by Ian. “The flooding here was worse than anyone has ever seen,” said

Matty Rose, a 56-year NALC member and South Florida Branch 1071 retiree. The nearby St. Johns River was pushed back by the ocean surge, which—combined with 20 inches of rain in 24 hours—overflowed lakes and ponds.

Rose, a DRF board member whose own home suffered damage, toured the region. “A retiree’s roof blew off and landed on the neighbor’s house,” he noted, and Rose met with other members whose homes, cars or belongings were damaged.

Region 9 National Business Agent Lynne Pendleton said she hadn’t heard of letter carrier injuries or major losses in the Carolinas or other states along the storm’s path. She mailed copies of DRF and Postal Employees’ Relief Fund application forms to Florida branches that lacked power or internet.

Situation in Puerto Rico

Region 15 Regional Administrative Assistant Tony Perconte related several dramatic rescues when Hurricane Fiona slammed large portions of Puerto Rico, including a carrier from Ponce Branch 826 who “had to climb to the roof with a

Hurricanes (continued)

ladder, him and his family, to get out of harm's way. Then, the last time I spoke to him, he was back cleaning up his house from the water damage, so they can get back in. I told him about DRF, gave him my cell phone number if he needed anything. He was appreciative to hear from the NALC."

Perconte, who met with postal authorities in Puerto Rico to discuss recovery efforts, noted, "The letter carriers are tough out there. They're used to this, but it doesn't make it easier."

Widespread absence of electricity and water and working generators has affected letter carriers in the office and at home, Branch 826 President **Joel Martinez** said. Crews were brought in to clean post offices that were flooded and/or full of mud.



Fort Myers saw some of the worst damage from Hurricane Ian.

observed, with power losses affecting letter carrier homes and supermarkets. Meanwhile, scarcity of diesel fuel has affected cell towers, making contact with members difficult: "If we can't get gasoline and the cell towers aren't running, we can't reach letter carriers and they can't reach us."

After a record 31 inches of rain, Santini helped branch members "get the NALC disaster relief that's available," including **Wolfgang Goerke**, who fled the onslaught of water and mud at his home.

"We didn't know how much is going to be inside the house, and we got scared and left," Goerke said.

Disaster Relief Foundation

As soon as the hurricanes struck, NALC began identifying affected members to ensure that they were safe and to provide assistance through the DRF. The foundation has arranged for delivery of uniforms and supplies to stricken members and is helping them apply for grants. Davidson has worked closely with local branch leaders to see which members might need emergency funds because their homes were uninhabitable.

The DRF was created in 2018 to make it easier for help to reach members. Many branches had asked NALC to establish a mechanism facilitating donations, grants and other assistance to carriers affected by disasters.

NALC President Fredric Rolando announced the foundation's creation at NALC's 2018 convention in Detroit. He said the DRF "reflects the will of the

members, who have asked for a way to help their fellow carriers quickly and efficiently."

Using donations from letter carriers, the foundation provides aid and has a trained volunteer network to respond to disasters. Donations go directly to individual carriers or to branches and state associations needing assistance; no administrative costs are deducted.

Donations can be sent to NALC Disaster Relief Foundation, 100 Indiana Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20001-2144; or by credit card at nalc.org/nrdfdonate. The foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization. Contributions to the DRF may be tax-deductible. It is recommended that you consult your tax advisor.

The application for a relief grant is on the foundation's website, nalc.org/disaster. Grants are provided for property damage sustained to a primary residence, automobile or personal property from causes such as, but not limited to, hurricanes, floods, tornadoes, wildfires, earthquakes or severe storms, and are provided only to NALC members. Members do not have to wait for emergency relief or insurance claims to be settled to apply. Applications must be received within 120 days from the date of the natural disaster, unless the applicant can provide sufficient reasons for a delay.

"These hurricanes will have long-lasting effects," Rolando said. "Letter carriers and branches seeking to help their fellow carriers can give through the Disaster Relief Foundation." **PR**



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.

Union members and officers in Puerto Rico and the States have been calling to offer support, Martinez said. That includes San Juan Branch 869 President **John Kennedy Rivera**, who brought food to Salinas, where it was needed.

Indeed, there has been a "borderline" food crisis in some areas, Branch 826 steward **Roberto Santini**