



(From top left) Hurricane Charley struck the campus of Orlando's First Baptist Church. Wind gusts reaching 145 mph caused extensive damage to the two-story Faith Building, which houses meeting rooms and a kitchen. The damage did not keep members from gathering for worship; a street in a residential neighborhood in Punta Gorda, Fla., is littered with debris following the hurricane's impact; Despite the message of this sign, Charley was not gentle on the campus of Orlando's First Baptist Church. Relief volunteers Vernon Boteler (left) from Florence, Miss., and Mike Thorn from Fulton, Miss., prepare food to be sent by the Red Cross to the Arcadia, Fla., community; Relief volunteers Stanford Owens (left) and Jerry German of Gloucester, Va., cut up a fallen tree in Oviedo, Fla. Volunteers Stan Shepard (left) from Eatonton, Ga., and Sidney Ethridge from Warner Robbins, Ga., prepare food to be sent out by the Red Cross into the Wauchula, Fla., area.

# Coming Together in a Crisis

*Florida hospitals unite to combat the devastation of Hurricane Charley*

*Tom Schaffner*

**I**n the state's worst storm in 12 years, central Florida was virtually crippled when Hurricane Charley ripped through earlier this month, leaving death and devastation in its path. With damage estimates to homes and businesses of \$15 billion and a death count at 20 (as of press time), central Florida was caught off guard when the hurricane, which reached winds of 145 miles per hour, slammed the western coastline near Fort Myers on Aug. 13.

Meteorologists predicted the intense Category 4 hurricane would touch down around the cities of Tampa and St. Petersburg. But on that deadly Friday the 13th, Charley bombarded the coastal town of Punta Gorda (about 90 miles south of Tampa), then unexpectedly shifted 15 degrees and made its way inland through Daytona Beach and into Orlando.

While the Tampa region was spared, towns like Punta Gorda, Port Charlotte, Sanibel and Captiva were literally ripped to pieces. Unfortunately, many who fled inland to avoid Charley found themselves directly in its path. The sudden change in the hurricane's direction trapped people in their communities with nowhere to go – the same people who only 24 hours earlier thought they were safe from the storm.

Although federal officials have expanded the disaster aid zone to 25 of the state's 67 counties, the retirement communities in Charlotte County were hit the hardest. Thirty-one mobile home parks in the county suffered major damage.

"We literally have thousands of people without homes who have spread out all over Florida and probably neighboring states," says Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Director Michael Brown. He notes that locating missing people could take several weeks. The search process has been greatly inhibited and much more dangerous in some areas due to downed power lines and scattered debris.

FEMA estimates that 80 percent of the buildings in Charlotte County sustained damage. Approximately 1 million Florida residents were still without power several days later, 2,300 were moved to emergency shelters and thousands of others were forced to stay in hotels or with friends or relatives. The agency says Florida has requested emergency housing for 10,000 people, and 4,000 National Guard troops have been deployed to the state's central region.

The American Red Cross says its mobilization for Charley is the organization's largest effort since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks in 2001. President George W. Bush toured the Charlotte County area by helicopter on Aug. 15 and promised timely federal assistance for the most devastating storm to hit the state since Hurricane Andrew ripped through in 1992. "A lot of people's lives have been turned upside down," he commented.

Residents in several communities were advised to boil water before drinking it because of contamination. During that time, mandatory curfews remained in effect in at least two counties.

## **FHA Leads the Charge**

Forty-eight hours before the storm reached Florida's coastline, the Florida Hospital Association (FHA) activated its hurricane response plan. "In doing so, [the FHA] worked side by side with

our state regulatory agencies, both the Agency for Healthcare Administration and the Department of Health, in assisting our hospitals and transporting and relocating patients in anticipation of the storm coming ashore," says Richard H. Rasmussen, vice president for strategic communications for the FHA in Tallahassee.

Rasmussen says Charley most severely affected three hospitals in Charlotte County – Charlotte Regional Medical Center, Fawcett Memorial and St. Joseph's. "We quickly came together and began a process of transporting those patients that remained in those facilities," he says. "We amassed 200 ambulances and nine helicopters to transport bed-laden or critically ill patients. Those patients who were not in a critical condition [were] transferred across the west coast of Florida." [As of press time, Charlotte Regional remains closed until repairs are made; Fawcett Memorial and St. Joseph's maintain their emergency rooms. Gulf Coast Hospital in Lee County was closed and Highlands Regional Medical Center in Highlands County evacuated patients as well, but maintained its emergency room. There are also a number of other hospitals that continue to operate on generator power.]

"Virtually, all hospitals from Fort Myers through Daytona Beach, right through the center of the state, were affected one way or another – whether it was power outages or employees and patients [affected] by the storm," Rasmussen says. In Charlotte County, for example, Rasmussen has received estimates that more than 500 hospital employees have lost their homes.

It is in response to reports such as this that Rasmussen says the FHA has created the Hurricane Charley Disaster Relief Fund for hospital employees who fell victim to the storm. Hospitals, corporations and foundations may contribute to the fund. Hospital foundations may accept designated funds from their employees and forward contributions the Hurricane Charley Disaster Relief Fund. They may then donate in the name of the hospital employees. As of Aug. 18, the FHA has raised \$200,000, reports Rasmussen.

He says hurricane disaster plans put in place by hospitals each year seem to have paid off in the rescue efforts. "When you think for a moment that more than 500 patients were transported after the hurricane cleared – without incident – it is a great testimony to the fact that our plans work," Rasmussen says. "Hospitals came together across the west coast of Florida to assist each other, and for that matter, all of Florida, because we received aid from Miami, Broward County and north Florida to help transfer patients and help the hospitals with staffing needs and supplies. It was a real team effort within the hospital community."

▶ Tom Schaffner

*Anyone interested in contributing to the Hurricane Charley Disaster Relief Fund can send their checks to: Hurricane Charley Disaster Relief Fund, c/o RT Image, 400 Chesterfield Parkway, Suite 100, Malvern, PA 19355. Checks payable to "Hurricane Charley Disaster Relief Fund."*