

Heroes of the Hurricane

The dedication and heroism of the associates of Life Care Center of Punta Gorda -- with support from their peers in surrounding centers -- in the wake of one of the worst storms to hit Florida is truly remarkable. Hurricane Charley struck the State of Florida -- Punta Gorda, in particular -- with a terrible force Friday, and our nation grieves with families who lost loved ones. The cost of the wreckage -- apart from the dreadful death toll -- is staggering.

The number killed by the storm has risen to 16, with countless other people sustaining injuries. State officials estimate caused damages could soar as high as \$11 billion for insured homes alone.

Life Care Center of Punta Gorda was in Charley's crosshairs as the Category 4 storm roared inland from the Gulf of Mexico. Its path caught everyone, including emergency agencies and forecasters, off guard, since the hurricane was predicted to take a direct jab at Tampa instead.

But the associates of our building battened down the hatches, reassured our residents and rode out the storm with a professionalism and courage that inspired their leaders. While other buildings in Punta Gorda were being smashed and ripped apart, the Life Care facility stood strong against 180-mile-an-hour winds. Only five windows were broken. The most damage was done on the roof of the building, where seven air conditioning units were swept off their bases. Three toppled off the two-story building to the parking lot below, while seven rolled around on the roof. Otherwise, the roof structure was in reasonably good shape and can be quickly repaired.

While it was impossible for residents to be evacuated Friday, because of the condition of roads, they made it fine through the night. By 6 p.m. Saturday, 161 residents were relocated to other Life Care buildings. Specifically, 42 went to Darcy Hall, 12 to Sarasota, 48 to Estero, 8 to Lakeside, 18 to Winter Haven, 8 to Inverrary, 8 to Port St. Lucie, 8 to New Port Richey and 9 to Gardens Court.

"We are blessed more than we know," Bryan Cook, Eastern Division vice president said Sunday. "We are tired and emotional, but we are tired in a good way. I thought Saturday at 7 a.m., 'Lord, I don't know how we are going to pull this off,' but with His help, and the dedication of our amazing associates, we did it."

Every member of the team, Cook said, was "taking care of residents, evacuating quickly, and everyone was thinking not about themselves, but about the safety and well-being of the residents. The stories coming out of this are unreal, and the synergy of the team was unbelievable."

Our Life Care associates proved the adage, with a little different twist: When the going gets tough, the tough -- and the compassionate -- get going. They were driven by a much more powerful force than any hurricane can deliver. They were driven by love.

--Beecher Hunter