

## Reflecting on the recovery from Hurricane Ian

By Hector Flores

The Christmas and New Year's holidays are a time of celebration and reflection. I wish you and your loved ones health, happiness and a deserving respite from the hard work we've all been doing to recover from the damage caused by Hurricane Ian.

I am so proud of the efforts of my colleagues from all departments, many of whom were working to restore services and reopen facilities even as they were repairing their own homes and navigating FEMA and insurance claims.

The Office of Emergency Management and Fire & EMS Department performed lifesaving work before and after the storm. Their leadership, readiness and professionalism struck many visiting personnel from agencies across the country as a model for emergency response.

The Community Services Department sheltered thousands of residents. Our Transit Division transported shelter seekers to our special needs shelter and back home again. Our Human Services Department worked with community nonprofit agencies to ramp up financial assistance efforts, wellness checks and temporary housing.

One of the most critical needs in the aftermath of a hurricane is information. We committed dozens of staff and volunteers to meet that need. From Sept. 24 through Wednesday our Call Center fielded more than 25,000 inquiries. The Joint Information Center communicated details on shelters, food and water, utilities outages, recovery centers, medical sites, debris collection, facility closures and reopenings, personal safety messages and more. The JIC issued more than 200 news releases and conducted dozens of in-person, online and phone interviews with media from across the country.

Realizing many were without power or internet access, we used every tool we could to spread our messages, including handing out one-page flyers that were updated daily. For those who relied on social media for news and information, we filled our half-dozen platforms with nearly 1,300 posts that had 9 million impressions, more than 1 million engagements, such as likes, comments and shares, and 970,000 video views. We stayed engaged answering questions and helping everyone we could.

The county website was swamped with users seeking storm information. On Sept. 27, the day before the storm hit, there were 100,000 active users on the website. Between Sept. 23 and Dec. 20, more than 1 million users viewed more than 2.7 million pages. Nearly 70% of those people were using their phones.

The Public Works Department team made a critical initial push to clear roadways so emergency responders could reach patients. They restored traffic lights in an amazingly short time and continue to work on repairing or replacing more than 80,000 street signs that were damaged or destroyed. They set up four drop-off sites, so residents could clear debris from their property.

The Community Development Department opened within days of the storm's landfall to accept and process thousands of permit applications, including nearly 10,000 roof permits so far. The Budget and Administrative Services staff tracked employee hours, contractor work, emergency purchases, and secured office and open space for displaced staff and support agencies.

The Utilities Department worked around the clock immediately after the storm to restore critical drinking water and wastewater service throughout the county. The Facilities Department more than 160 county facilities and performed essential repairs to reopen offices, parks, libraries and recreation centers as soon as possible. The Tourism Department performed outreach to its tourism partners to determine critical needs and provide support.

The Human Resources Department coordinated messaging to more than 1,300 employees, some of whom had lost their homes or possessions, and recruited new staff to help with the recovery effort. The Economic Development Office identified impacted businesses to steer them to federal and state assistance, worked with employment agencies to connect people who lost jobs with new employers and conducted online webinars to answer questions and help business owners with their recovery.

Our approach will be to turn recovery challenges into opportunities to bring Charlotte County back better than ever. The new year will be bright.

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