

A social crime: Eight elderly dead in Florida nursing home after days without air conditioning

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The death of eight elderly residents of a nursing home in Hollywood, Florida, north of Miami, after suffering for several days in sweltering heat without air conditioning following Hurricane Irma, is not only a horrific tragedy, it is a social crime.

The heat index in southeast Florida overnight Tuesday into Wednesday was around 90 degrees Fahrenheit (32 Celsius), unbearable for many of the residents of the Rehabilitation Center at Hollywood Hills. One person who visited her mother at the home on Tuesday afternoon said that “it felt like 110 degrees.” Staff called police early Wednesday after residents woke up sick, and at least one person was found unresponsive.

Four residents died at the nursing home, and another four died after being sent to the hospital. At least 115 residents were evacuated by Hollywood Fire Rescue.

Repairman Dave Long told Local 10 News that he had been fighting with Florida Power and Light (FPL), the power company, since Monday to send someone to fix a fuse on the nursing home’s air conditioning unit that had popped during the storm. “There’s nothing we can do,” Long said. “We’ve been calling and calling. ... It just doesn’t seem to be going anywhere and I can’t do anything until we get that fuse popped back in.”

Another woman quoted anonymously by Local 10 News said that she had called FPL on behalf of her mother who was in the facility repeatedly since Monday demanding to know when the air conditioning would be turned back on. “I kept calling,” she said. “And I said, ‘This is life-threatening.’”

The residents were left to suffer in the suffocating heat and humidity even as the hospital across the street, Memorial Regional Hospital, maintained power

throughout the storm and in its aftermath. While the nursing home had a backup power generator, it was used only for cooking food.

FPL spokesman Rob Gould sought to pass the blame, stating at a press conference on Wednesday that the nursing home had not been identified prior to the current Hurricane season as a high priority facility by officials from Broward County, where Hollywood is located.

“They identified which facilities were to be critical top infrastructure facilities, this was not one of them,” Gould said.

The Rehabilitation Center at Hollywood Hills, which is affiliated with Larkin Community Hospital, received a health inspection rating of “much below average” from the Florida Agency for Healthcare Administration after a review in March found unsanitary conditions and poor food.

Beyond the immediate responsibility of FPL and local authorities, the deaths at the Hollywood nursing home are a byproduct of the criminal levels of neglect on the part of the ruling class revealed in the response to Hurricanes Harvey and Irma. In both cases, no systematic measures were taken to facilitate evacuations, particularly of the elderly and infirm who are not able to drive. Florida authorities clearly had nothing in place to ensure that its most vulnerable residents were safe after the storm.

At the same time, the massive power outage itself is the product of decades of neglect of basic social infrastructure. Some 10 million people, or about half the population of Florida, are still without power, which in some areas may not be restored for weeks. There have been extremely limited efforts to place

power lines underground and fortify aboveground substations to protect the electrical network from wind and falling trees. This is a privilege limited to only the wealthiest neighborhoods.

There is a danger that the deaths in Hollywood will be repeated. The Florida Health Care Association reported that one quarter of all licensed nursing homes in the state were without electricity as of Tuesday and were relying on generators to supply power.

The elderly, the infirm and those recovering from surgeries are among the most vulnerable to illness and death in the aftermath of major storms. Those in nursing homes are especially at risk as they may rely on oxygen, ventilators and refrigeration for medication to stay alive. There are some 73,000 nursing home residents across the state, and there are approximately 3.6 million senior citizens in Florida, many of whom live on their own or with some form of assisted living.

More than half of Century Village, a large retirement community in Pembroke Pines, Florida, west of Hollywood, was still without power and under a boil-water advisory Wednesday. Residents and their relatives sent out desperate pleas for assistance on Twitter and Facebook. With the elevators not functioning, those confined to wheelchairs were stuck in their upstairs apartments with no air conditioning as temperatures rose throughout the day rose to an unbearable 94 degrees Fahrenheit.

So far, there have been 36 deaths in the US related to Irma and 43 more across the Caribbean. Multiple deaths in the US have been ascribed to carbon monoxide poisoning from generators operated inside homes or garages, often out of fear that they could be stolen if left unattended outside. A seven-year-old girl in Lakeland, east of Tampa, died of carbon monoxide poisoning on Wednesday. In Orange County, three members of a family were killed and four more were sickened after a generator was left running in their home.

Even as the death toll continues to mount in the aftermath of Hurricanes Irma and Harvey, the mainstream media has hailed the government's response, giving the Trump administration a pass and covering up the criminal negligence that has left millions without power and at the mercy of sweltering heat.

The *New York Times* proclaimed in a headline

Tuesday: "Amid Chaos of Storms, US Shows It Has Improved Its Response." The article ascribed the "surprisingly contained" death toll to lessons supposedly learned in the aftermath of 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, including the formation and massive growth of the Department of Homeland Security.

The *Washington Post* proclaimed that the Trump administration had won "cautious praise" for its response to both Harvey and Irma.

The attempt to whitewash the government response to the hurricanes is bound up with concerns that the devastation wrought by the storms could fuel social anger. Both the Democrats and Republicans, moreover, are anxious to move on to other priorities.

Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer and House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, both Democrats, dined with Trump Wednesday night at the White House, where they discussed how they could extend their political alliance on domestic legislation. The main aim of an agreement between the Democrats and Trump would be to push through major tax cuts for corporations, which the Trump administration has defined as its most important domestic priority.



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