

Two million in Florida still without power nearly a week after Hurricane Irma

Trévon Austin
16 September 2017

Nearly a week after Hurricane Irma, the most powerful storm ever recorded in the Atlantic, ravaged through Florida, the impact of the storm's devastation continues to unfold as residents experience limited recovery.

Recovery has been sluggish due to the fact that many areas are still flooded and millions remain without power. According to the Florida Division of Emergency Management, approximately 1.9 million households in Florida were still without power as of Friday morning. Officials warned that areas in southwest and southern Florida will not have power restored until later next week.

In Highlands County in south Florida, an area with a 19.4 percent poverty rate, nearly three-quarters of residents were still without power Friday. Residents had to wait in long lines to buy generators from a local Lowes store, as power could continue to be out until next week.

In an interview with CNN, Jessica Gonzalez, a resident of the city of LaBelle, in Hendry County, 30 miles east of Fort Myers, recounted her experience with the storm and its aftermath.

"I honestly didn't think it would be that bad. You hear a lot it's Category 5, but you really don't think it's going to hit your house," Gonzalez said.

Her home was damaged by the storm and was still without power. Because the heat inside their home is so unbearable, Gonzalez cooks outside and sleeps in her car with her husband and two-year-old daughter.

Another report came from Bob and Tara Hahn, residents of the same neighborhood in LaBelle.

During the storm, a large tree smashed into their home, sending heavy rains pouring inside. Waiting for power to return, the couple was forced to move their 10 children into their eldest daughter's two-bedroom

house. As they wait, 17 people are living under one roof.

For days, millions across Florida have dealt with sweltering temperatures and humidity without air conditioning. Meteorologists forecast temperatures to fluctuate around 90 degrees Fahrenheit for the next few days.

According to Florida Power & Light (FPL), people on the west coast are expected to have power again on September 22. Without electricity, the humid climate will present unbearable situations for residents across the state.

Conditions like these and criminal negligence on the part of FPL and the state were responsible for the deaths of eight elderly residents of the Rehabilitation Center at Hollywood Hills, a nursing home in Hollywood, Florida, north of Miami.

With FPL slow to fix a damaged power transformer, residents were subject to dangerous temperatures without air conditioning, even as the hospital across the street, Memorial Regional Hospital, maintained power throughout the storm and in its aftermath.

According to a time line released by the nursing home on Friday, repeated calls were made by staff to FPL and state officials requesting assistance in restoring power and air conditioning. The power outage was reported by staff on Monday and Tuesday without anyone being sent from FPL. Three messages were also left with a hotline promoted by Florida governor Rick Scott.

Another eight calls were made by nursing home staff over the two days to the Florida Department of Emergency Management, Florida Department of Health and Florida Agency for Health Care Administration, but no immediate action was taken.

Utility workers from FPL only showed up to fix the

transformer on Wednesday after residents had been found dead in their rooms, overwhelmed by the suffocating heat and humidity. Broward County had not designated nursing homes as critical infrastructure facilities, meaning that they were not high priority for the utility company after the storm.

FPL spokesman Peter Robbins continued the company's efforts to shift the blame onto the nursing home workers, telling the *Sun Sentinel* on Friday, "What we know now is that a portion of the facility did, in fact, have power, that there was a hospital with power across the parking lot from this facility and that the nursing home was required to have a permanently installed, operational generator."

It is still not clear why the staff did not evacuate residents from the facility when it became clear that conditions had become intolerable.

At least 27 more deaths have been reported across the state, many of them due to carbon monoxide poisoning. Desperate to have power again, people buy generators and run them inside of their own homes. Unaware of the dangers of carbon monoxide, those within are at extreme risk of serious illness or death.

In Orange County, sheriff's deputies found two teenagers and a woman, Jan Lebron Diaz, 13, Kiara Lebron Diaz, 16 and Desiree Diaz Molina, 34, dead, while four others were taken to a hospital to treat carbon monoxide poisoning.

Further south, residents of the Florida Keys continue to express frustration as they are still denied access to the Lower Keys.

An overwhelming 90 percent of homes were either damaged or destroyed when Irma made landfall over the Keys on Sunday. The US Department of Defense estimates that as many as 10,000 people remained on the low-lying islands as they were whipped by high winds and overwhelmed by storm surge.

Monroe County Commissioner Heather Carruthers asked residents for patience Thursday, citing the high number of power outages. "If folks don't have power to boil water or don't have fuel to boil water, we're really concerned about health, which is part of why we're not inviting everyone back yet" to parts of the Keys, she said.

Meanwhile in the Caribbean, the island of Barbuda was completely wiped out by Hurricane Irma when the storm hit last weekend. The island, which had a

population of nearly 1,800, was completely evacuated, and at least 95 percent of structures on the small island were destroyed.

Residents have been moved into cramped government buildings and nursing homes, which are serving as shelters on the neighboring island of Antigua.

"The damage is complete," Antigua and Barbuda's Ambassador to the US, Ronald Sanders, told *USA Today*. "For the first time in 300 years, there's not a single living person on the island of Barbuda—a civilization that has existed on that island for over 300 years has now been extinguished."



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact