

# Hurricane Irma: Notes from the Field

## *An Eyewitness Account of a First Time, Red Cross Disaster Volunteer*

by Mark W. Stevens, Ph.D.

Soon after Hurricane Harvey hit Texas in August, 2017, I came across the memo from the California Psychological Association (CPA) for mental health professionals to volunteer services for disaster relief efforts. These efforts were via the Red Cross, and as I mulled over teaming up with an organization with so much negative press, Hurricane Irma was barreling straight for southern Florida, promising to grow into a potentially catastrophic level 4 or 5 event. After much contemplation, and with encouragement from my wife, I decided to find out for myself what the Red Cross was about. My rationale was that regardless of whether the Red Cross was good or bad, it was the only means by which I could help as many people as possible in the moment of this terrible crisis; I figured that by experiencing the workings of the Red Cross firsthand, I could also offer constructive criticism, if I had any.

After contacting the Red Cross in San Diego, I completed an on-line application and submitted to a background check. I underwent extensive on-line training, some of which was focused on “psychological first aid” aimed at providing mental health disaster relief services. I completed these preparations in the evenings and over two weekends while maintaining regular client appointments and preparing my clients for my absence upon deployment to one of the disaster sites.

On Friday, Sept 15th, 2017, I was notified that the Red Cross needed my services in Orlando, Florida. The San Diego headquarters of the Red Cross connected me to a service that arranged my flight, and issued my vest, ID badge, and a Red Cross prepaid expense card. I learned that the Red Cross was concurrently active in 67 other disaster situations such as fires and floods across the country, in addition to hundreds of international crises, including the earthquake that had just ravaged Mexico. Things were becoming very real and in a rare moment of self-doubt, I honestly wondered what I had gotten myself into.

I flew out the next day, fully aware that this was going to be a seminal event in my 20 years in practice as a clinical psychologist. Upon landing, I met up with a fellow volunteer and Red Cross veteran named David, and together, we made our way to our assigned hotel for the night. The next day, Dave and I, along with a hundred-plus other veterans

and first-timers made our way to the staging location to receive our orientation and assignments. A Disaster Mental Health orientation was given by Dr. Bill Martin, the lead person for the mental health volunteers, and several of us were assigned to a shelter in the town of Estero, located along the Gulf coast in Lee County, roughly five hours southwest of Orlando. We were greeted by Peggy, our Disaster Mental Health supervisor and taken around the shelter to meet with its roughly 400 residents. It was late, and this mass of men, women, and children had already done what they could to make a temporary home for themselves on cots in a large gymnasium. The other volunteers and I spent that evening sleeping on our own cots in the communal staff room at the shelter.

The next day, we were each teamed up with a partner for the duration of our deployment. I had the good fortune of being teamed with Ellen, a marriage and family therapist from North Carolina; this was her second Red Cross deployment. Ellen and I spent the morning conducting mental health interventions with shelter residents, and were then reassigned to another shelter in North Fort Meyers, where we began conducting interventions with both shelter residents and the staff, comprising volunteer nurses, police, and various other disaster action team members. We learned quickly not to get too settled in any one place as our assignments were likely to vary on a daily or even hourly basis.

The North Fort Meyers shelter was inhabited by residents under unusually severe duress. Many had been homeless even before Irma struck; some were suffering from severe mental illness and had been without their medication for days. Other residents had lost homes, cars, and jobs as a result of Irma, and some had been separated from or lost contact with family members. As the Red Cross was actively engaged in the Response phase of Disaster Relief, its primary objective was to move everyone, especially the most vulnerable, to a safe place. The experience of emotional duress was not exclusive to the residents; staff volunteers and management alike struggled with the immensity of the chaos, overwhelming need, and long hours demanded of them to ameliorate the suffering created by Irma. Ellen and I spent an entire day conducting interventions among staff and residents. That evening, all disaster responders, Ellen and I included, were assigned lodging at the Marriot Resort on Marco Island in Collier County.

The beauty of this luxury venue was strangely juxtaposed with the no-frills grit of its current residents – the volunteers belonging to various disaster response teams, all decked out in their respective distinguishing garb. Such juxtapositions were ubiquitous in Southern Florida; the devastation, which was so profound that in many places the debris piled up along the roadsides was high enough to block my view of the homes behind it; dozens of buzzards (yes, buzzards!) circling overhead, underscoring the loss of animal life. These scenes of despair were in sharp contrast to the tenacity of the people and the intense recovery efforts as evidenced by work trucks for every kind of outreach program, repair, or reconstruction job lining the highways for as far as the eye could see in either direction, with crews working around the clock along the highways.

The needs of the residents, the relief operation, and indeed, the Disaster Response personnel were constantly changing. Two days after working at the Marriot, Ellen and I participated in a large media event with other volunteers from the Red Cross and other agencies, such as the Salvation Army, local support and outreach groups, churches, FEMA, insurance companies, and interns working for the United States Senator from Florida, Marco Rubio. During this day-long event, we provided information and resources to a continuous line of people desperate for help—one person after the other, family after family, broken, frightened, and confused, with needs ranging from the very basic (such as food and water), to resources for repairing and rebuilding their homes, finding jobs, and securing cleaning supplies for the mold, rats, and other infestations that are part and parcel of a post-disaster world.

On September 21st, Ellen and I returned to the North Fort Meyers shelter where we resumed our work assessing and helping both residents and staff take a few steps closer to a state of overall health and well-being. There were a few particularly memorable residents that left a deep impression on me. One was a man who had been living in Colorado with his wife prior to hurricane Irma, and flew to Florida on their proverbial “last dime” for the promise of a new and much needed job. Shortly after arriving, Irma struck and destroyed the business and any hope he had of employment. Another was a 94-year old woman whose home was destroyed in the storm. She had lost contact with her daughter and son, and we were working to help her get out of the shelter and into a temporary assisted living situation. She had a hard time processing why she couldn’t go home, and why her children weren’t there to help her. It was clear that both cases would need a prolonged recovery effort that would long outlast my own deployment.

Many of the mental health volunteers were interested working directly in the community and on Friday, September 22nd, Ellen and I were assigned to follow a Red Cross Emergency Response Vehicle (ERV) into Lehigh Acres, one of the harder hit neighborhoods. As we pulled into the area, it looked like a ghost town with very few people out and about. While the ERV staff blasted the alert horn and announced their presence via loudspeaker, Ellen and I split up and walked through the devastated neighborhood in search of the homebound. We wound our way around the broken homes, fallen power lines, snapped trees, and dead vegetation, and eventually found our way to the community center, where the facilitator lent us one of the center’s golf carts to make our job easier. The temperature was in the 90s with humidity to match, and the residents had been without power until the day before we arrived.

The following day would be the end of our nine-day deployment before we would fly home. Ellen and I decided to spend our last full day working in the neighborhood of Golden Gate, located just north of Naples in Collier County. We were told that the devastation there may actually surpass any we had seen elsewhere. The eye of hurricane Irma passed directly over this town causing flooding and spawning tornados. Given our

experience in Lehigh Acres, we decided to head to the community centers in order to gather more information and assistance for our efforts. There were signs of devastation everywhere; the residents were still without power, there was visible flood damage everywhere, and many homes had roofs missing, ceilings caved in, and walls crumbled to rubble.

We spotted a FEMA truck parked in front of the center and we spoke to the people staffing it. They were ready to move on as they had been there for a while and as yet had seen no residents. But Ellen would not hear of it; she asked them if they would give us a couple of hours to round up some people. The FEMA staff agreed, but we had a challenge ahead of us: the area was sprawling and we didn't know where best to go. Then, as luck would have it, we met a volunteer who led us to a trailer park in the center of it all. The residents, mostly Hispanic, were lining up as we arrived for food being passed out by a local Christian group. Neither Ellen nor I speak fluent Spanish, but language was no barrier when Ellen waved one of the many donated Mickey Mouse toys that we had in the car, which prompted the kids to come running toward us, and their parents followed. In an instant we were surrounded, and eventually made our way to the pastor of the Christian group who announced the purpose of our visit over a loud speaker. English speakers in the community then guided us to those they knew were in greater need and more reticent to seek help on their own. One inspirational member of this community was a man named David, who despite being disabled himself, cared for his mother in their modest trailer. David appeared to be the de-facto counselor in his community and was doing everything he could to help his neighbors. We were particularly impressed by his awareness of the importance of his own well-being, apparent when he would catch himself revving up emotionally, and without skipping a beat would say out loud to himself, "Relax!," and continue with whatever he was saying or doing.

The day was hot and humid as they had all been, and we were tiring rapidly. In addition to providing the community with information regarding how and where to obtain food, water, clean up kits, and the possibility of financial assistance, we offered a compassionate ear and encouraged self care. We had passed on the information about locating the FEMA truck, but worried that the needs of these people far surpassed what we could do for them. Our hope was that a Red Cross ERV would show up with much needed supplies. As we made our way back to our car, another Christian group had arrived to help the community. We advised them of some of the need we encountered, and just as we were about to leave, a rental truck pulled into the area, driven by a man wearing a Red Cross vest. That was a huge relief; the volunteers of the Christian group joined us in handing out food, water, clean up kits, roof tarps, diapers, rakes, shovels, etc. to the residents.

Returning to the community center, we saw that the FEMA personnel had set up camp, and a line of residents was waiting to talk with them. We set up a table in another area,

and asked FEMA to direct to us anyone who could benefit from our assistance. After roughly another hour of seeing relatively few people, we checked the FEMA room again. It was packed! Observing that people were finally getting their immediate concerns addressed, we decided to leave. We'd like to think our efforts that day in the community had at least a little to do with this successful outcome.

Suddenly, Saturday evening had arrived, and the next day I would be flying back home to San Diego, California, and my partner to North Carolina. I say suddenly, because for nearly the entire nine-day deployment, I was living in an altered state of reality with very little sense of time. I worried prior to deploying, how I would handle a disaster situation, and now I wondered how I was going to handle returning to a more orderly life where any needs and wants could be readily met. Odd as that sounds, please consider this: while much of the rest of the country was bickering over whether it is appropriate that an athlete "take a knee" during a playing of the national anthem, or whether entertainers should be boycotted for pointing out the flaws in our country, and discussions about race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, politics, religion, age abound, the people I had encountered in the place I was preparing to leave were truly concerned with the well-being of others. Both staff and residents worked harmoniously together, with little regard for socio-cultural differences, their singular goal to help their fellow man or woman get back on their own feet. Having been in the throes of disaster recovery, I have seen firsthand the hope, determination, and resilience that humans are capable of.

Ellen asked me several times if I would consider volunteering again; my answer was always, and still is an unequivocal yes. And I know she feels exactly the same. We know we did everything we could to help those in need, but what we received in return far surpassed anything we gave. The work was hard, but everywhere we went, we met and worked with selfless people, whose focus was the welfare of others, including us. The attitude and the energy of both were incredibly and unusually positive for the most part, especially considering the circumstances. It was focused on moving forward.

With regard to the Red Cross, I have never experienced a more single-mindedly determined group of people, collectively or individually, whose sole mission was to help those in need at such a deep level. One veteran Red Cross volunteer we encountered was a 74-year old woman with unparalleled energy and dedication; after wrapping up her work in Florida, she was making arrangements to fly to Puerto Rico to help the victims of Hurricane Maria. Like any large organization, the Red Cross is far from perfect and the criticisms and complaints directed toward it are not always unwarranted; but having been in the trenches with them and seeing the remarkable work they do, I can't help but wonder how many people would suffer and potentially die if it wasn't for their efforts.

Last but not least, I would like to acknowledge my unexpected pleasure of meeting and befriending Ellen, just one of the many incredibly strong and focused individuals I met during my experience in Florida. Her heart of compassion and empathy helped me to

maintain my bearings on a daily basis. Working with her inspired me to work at a higher level than I thought I could. I look forward to continuing this friendship for many years to come.