

‘The Best Response and Recovery Team in the Nation’

The VFW Department of Florida’s Emergency Response Team leads a statewide initiative to battle COVID-19 crisis

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The VFW Department of Florida led the charge in an initiative to end the COVID-19 crisis across the state.

The Department partnered with the Brevard County Veterans Council and Florida Department of Emergency Management (FEMA) in Tallahassee, Fla., to gain ground against the wide-spreading pandemic in March and April.

In doing so, the Florida VFW’s Emergency Response Team often transported masks, gloves, gowns, hats and booties to first responders and hospitals across Florida, which included Halifax Health Medical Center in Daytona and Good Samaritan Medical Center in West Palm Beach.

“Florida veterans have the most experienced and equipped disaster response and recovery teams in the nation,” said Glen Tilley, VFW Department of Florida senior vice commander. “Under the direction of Department Commander Tony Purdy, the team can deploy to any disaster, anywhere in Florida within 15 minutes. Our quick-hit trailer is stocked to the roof with everything needed to assist in any situation.”

Don Pearsall created the Department’s Emergency Response Team in 2018 after the destruction of Hurricane Michael, a Category 5 storm that ripped through the Caribbean and parts of Florida.

“It was chaos,” said Pearsall, who is currently the response team’s director, while also serving as chairman of the Brevard Veterans Council and coordinator for VFW’s Southern Conference Disaster Management. “Trucks, cars and trailers from every state were bringing everything under the sun to the area, but there needed to be better organization and

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prioritizing of relief supplies.”

Pearsall crafted a “centralized sort of triage” in order to distribute supplies over a period of months to those most in need. His philosophy was later tested when Hurricane Dorian decimated parts of the Bahamas in 2019. The team gathered an array of supplies and organized them in order of importance. Pearsall then shipped the goods aboard 11 separate flights targeting Marsh Harbor, Treasure Cay and other remote airports across the island.

Pearsall’s success during Hurricane Dorian earned him permission from Florida’s Department commander to build a triage system for the state, where immediate needs are the top priority.

“The quick-hit concept is simple,” Pearsall said. “There are five trained coordinators that cover Florida. When a natural disaster strikes, the coordinators travel to the affected areas to do an initial assessment as to what is needed first. The trailer and teams are already en-route with basic human supplies such as first-aid kits, medical supplies, emergency food and water, pet food, feminine products, tarpaulins, cook stoves, emergency lighting and generators for veterans without power that need medical devices such as a CPAP or oxygenators.”

Pearsall added that coordinators also invest plenty of time setting up communication among the other 176 VFW Posts in Florida, dictating what each Post will supply and where it will go.

“The team also has a large BBQ cooker that can be dispatched and used at local fire stations,” Pearsall said. “This gas, coal or wood behemoth when fired can serve a community with food donated from grocery stores in the affected areas.”

The program’s success during previous natural disasters and now during the COVID-19 crisis has made Pearsall a commodity in need. Alongside 1st Deputy Director Bob Doyle, commander of VFW Post 12167 in Merritt Island, Fla., Pearsall has been asked to set up similar programs across all states belonging to VFW’s Southern Conference.

The Department of Florida’s Emergency Response Team also has working relationships with the American Red Cross, Salvation Army, Team Rubicon and the Cajun Navy Airboats. In 2019, the team distributed more than 309,000 meals to the homeless or needy veteran population in Florida.

The team’s full efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic will be documented in a future article by VFW magazine in an issue slated for later this year.

By Ismael Rodriguez Jr./VFW magazine