

'It's a Matter of Caring for Each Other'

VFW Posts across the country provided disaster relief for communities hit by Hurricane Ida last year

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Since the VFW's inception more than 120 years ago, its veterans' pursuance to help communities ravaged by natural disasters remains undeterred.

Under the VFW mantle, veterans from across the country annually carry out missions to combat the harsh aftermath of floods, wildfires, typhoons or hurricanes ravaging a community.

When Hurricane Ida struck the Louisiana coastline last year, causing the most widespread damage to the state since Hurricane Katrina in 2005, several VFW Posts from across the state provided a local lifeline for many.

VFW Post 8973 Commander Chris Cox, a New Orleans transplant who fell in love with the city's rich culture and history more than a decade ago, prepared for the worst, anticipating his Post would serve as an anchor of hope for fellow Louisianans once the hurricane passed.

"Down here in Louisiana, we take care of our neighbors," said Cox, a retired Marine Corps master sergeant with more than 20 years in the service. "It's not about being the hero of the neighborhood. It's a matter of caring for each other."

Cox, who currently works as a strategic communications specialist in the VA's Office of Community Care in New Orleans, and his fellow Post members quickly turned the Post into a hub for locals in need of food and water.

Through word of mouth and Cox's connections within the community, the Post secured ample donations from residents and a few restaurants. Among the donations were freezers, refrigerators, food and supplies.

"We were taking whatever we got and turning it into meals," Cox said. "For anyone passing by, work crews, tired residents cleaning up their damaged homes, we were there. For many, this was the first hot meal they had in days."

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From Sept. 1-6, Post members served lunch and dinner, distributing more than 1,800 meals to those in need. The Post also secured more than \$25,000 worth of food, fuel, dry goods, baby food and sanitary supplies, which they distributed throughout areas near New Orleans hardest hit by Hurricane Ida.

“Disasters like this are a very familiar environment to veterans,” Cox added. “Lots of us have provided humanitarian relief in the Middle East, Haiti and other places, so we know how to do this.”

About 40 miles north across the Lake Pontchartrain Causeway, Cox’s statement rippled amongst members of VFW Post 7286 in Covington, Louisiana.

‘WE GOT YOUR BACK’

Like the efforts in New Orleans, Post 7286 opened its doors to locals in need of food, water, electricity and shelter.

“Our doors were open 24 hours a day, seven days a week,” said Post 7286 Commander Michael Henry. “We wanted to let our community know that they were not in this fight alone. We got your back.”

The Post’s efforts received backing from local vendors that included Yum Yum Gimme Sum, providing a food truck to cater meals for those in need. Post 7286 also received help from nonprofit Project Blessings All Year Round, which supplied toiletries for members to distribute.

RELIEF IN NEW JERSEY

It’s through word of mouth and a reputation for serving their community that VFW Post 2290 in Manville, New Jersey, was called upon in the wake of severe flooding and fires.

Although Hurricane Ida made landfall near the Gulf of Mexico, the remnants of the hurricane reached Manville, about 39 miles southwest of Newark, New Jersey. The town was ravaged by floodwaters, which led to gas-fed fires being made nearly unreachable.

In desperate need of help, the Manville Office of Emergency Management and the Red Cross called on Post 2290 to serve as a distribution center and later an emergency shelter for those in need of a place to rest.

“Because of the location of the Post, which is above the area that normally floods and the large size of our building, it makes us an ideal distribution center,” said Post 2290 Commander Andy Henkel.

“More importantly, we follow the motto ‘No One Does More.’”

From Sept. 1-5, the Post received an overwhelming amount of donations ranging in clothing, food, water, infant supplies and cleaning materials. With distribution help from its members, Auxiliary and other local volunteers, the Post provided two meals daily and at one point helped more than 340 people in need of a place to sleep.

“In the almost 90 years of our existence, we have been fortunate to be in a position to assist those who have suffered major disasters,” Henkel added. “In our most recent past, I can remember Hurricane Floyd, Irene and Sandy. We were open for various numbers of days and housed and fed comparable numbers of residents. So for us, this is normal, though unfortunate.”

That reality exemplifies how VFW and its Auxiliary members rally against danger to protect, care and lend a hand to those in need. As recorded in an American Report by the Corporation for National and Community Service, veterans are 25 percent more likely to volunteer, 17 percent more likely to make a monetary donation and 30 percent more likely to participate in local organizations than civilians without military experience.

Their efforts also carry a lasting effect in and around their communities, as presented by Post 7286 in New Orleans. In the weeks following the aftermath, the Post has continued to raise funds to help those hit hardest by Hurricane Ida.

As of late September, the Post had raised more than \$75,000 in materials, monetary donations and the manpower to provide boats, trucks and fuel to distribute those supplies. The Post has also donated \$925 toward the Louisiana VFW Disaster Relief Fund, which on Sept. 20 received an additional \$50,000 from VFW’s National Headquarters in Kansas City, Missouri, for statewide distribution.

“You can never do enough, so we keep providing any help we can to those in need,” Cox said. “This is a community where mutual support, respect and service to others is part of everyday life.”

This article is featured in the 2022 January issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Ismael Rodriguez Jr.](#), senior writer for VFW magazine.