

'It Made Me Proud to be a VFW Member'

The VFW Department of Florida's response in the aftermath of Hurricane Ian helped many Floridians

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When Hurricane Ian ravaged parts of Florida in late September, VFW's Department of Florida relied on its Emergency Response and Recovery team to channel adequate disaster relief in a hurry.

VFW member Don Pearsall formed the team in 2018 after Hurricane Michael, a Category 5 storm, ripped through the Caribbean and parts of Florida. Even before Ian made landfall last September, Pearsall and his team were making preparations.

"What we did was deploy our team right away," said Pearsall, director of the Emergency Response Team, as well as coordinator for VFW's Southern Conference Disaster Management board. "We have seven field coordinators in charge of Districts across the state, and we heard from those in areas near Sarasota and Fort Myers to see what the community needed."

Backed by the VFW Department of Florida's disaster relief fund, and given the go-ahead by both Department of Florida Commander Ronald Mills and Adjutant Eugene Perrino after they received reports on the damages, Pearsall and his 15-person Emergency Response Team deployed within 15 minutes.

Pearsall split the team into two units responsible for two trailers filled with supplies and food destined for Sarasota and Fort Myers Beach, respectively. There, they set up control points at each location in a matter of hours.

"We rolled in the day after the storm, and it was heartbreaking to see," said Pearsall, a Life member of the Department of Florida who deployed to Fort Myers Beach himself.

Supplied by the Department of Florida, the Emergency Response Team distributed more than 1,800 cases of water, 900 MRE meals, a trailer full of canned foods and hundreds of

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other cleaning supplies that included 800 gallons of bleach.

From aiding firefighters and first responders to veterans and residents in dire need of a hand up, Pearsall acknowledged that supplies and basic human necessities would not unburden them of the heartache unfolding.

But among the rubble and destruction left behind, the example set by local veterans made his chest swell.

“I felt very sorry for the people down there because losing their homes and everything else is just demoralizing,” Pearsall said. “But seeing our local volunteer VFW members there cope with losing everything they had, while still showing up every day to help, is something that I can’t explain except to say that it made me proud to be a VFW member.”

This article is featured in the 2023 April issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Ismael Rodriguez Jr.](#), senior writer for VFW magazine.