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Early test for Charities' new disaster response plan

By **Jacquelyn Horkan**, Tallahassee

Hurricane Dennis churned ashore July 10. Less than 24 hours later, Deacon Richard Turcotte was in Tallahassee, the vanguard of an unprecedented relief effort.

As the CEO of the Archdiocese of Miami's Catholic Charities, Deacon Turcotte heads the agency's disaster response team, which has been ordered to Florida's westernmost corner to assist in the Hurricane Dennis recovery.



COURTESY PHOTO BY JUSTIN BIAN

The disaster recovery team grew out of the archdiocese's experience with Hurricane Andrew in 1992 and Hurricane Georges in 1998. The four hurricanes of 2004 gave the team a heavy dose of seasoning.

Diocese of Venice, Inc., left, and Deacon Marcus Hepburn, statewide disaster coordinator for the Florida Catholic Conference, interview a survivor of Hurricane Dennis in the town of St. Marks. Jett's home was flooded by more than 4-feet of water.

This year, the Miami Catholic Charities disaster response is working in the context of a statewide Mutual Aid Agreement among all seven of Florida's dioceses.

"Last year we did not have coordinated effort and preplanning," says Deacon Turcotte. "This year we knew ah of time what was going to be done and who was going to do it."

The unprecedented devastation of hurricanes Charley, Frances, Ivan and Jeanne spawned a realization in 2004 that the ever-present possibility of natural and manmade disasters demanded an organized response from the Catholic Church. After eight months of study, discussion and planning, the Mutual Aid Agreement was signed by representatives of Florida's seven Catholic Charities and Bishop John H. Ricard, SSJ, episcopal moderator of the Social Development Commission. Just a month later, Bishop Ricard's own diocese would provide the testing ground for the new disaster-response plan.

"The Mutual Aid Agreement spells out exactly what each diocese will provide in the event of a disaster," said Marcus Hepburn, emergency management specialist at the Florida Catholic Conference. "State and federal agencies look to the Catholic Church as caregivers to the poor and to special populations, such as immigrants. This will help us provide a better response to that challenge."

Hepburn joined the conference in January to provide planning and coordination for the new disaster-relief mechanism. Deacon Turcotte describes him as the eyes and ears of those who are working on-site. Hepburn monitored the storm over the weekend from the state emergency operations center, sending out alerts on the storm's progress and setting the post-disaster response into motion.

Each diocesan Catholic Charities went on standby to fulfill the duties assigned to it through the Mutual Aid Agreement.

"Over the past couple of weeks we have been preparing packs of food that does not require cooking," says Al Rettig of Orlando Catholic Charities. "The packs are stored on pallets so they can be easily loaded on to one of our trucks if we are called."

Hours before Dennis hit, an e-mail from Hepburn warned the Catholic Charities' directors that, "Dennis is now the most intense June or July hurricane on record, beating out Hurricane Audrey of June 1957." (Audrey smashed into Texas and Louisiana, killing 390 people and making it the sixth-most-deadly U.S. hurricane on record.)

Inexplicably, Dennis defied its early summer predecessors, losing strength before coming on shore, a turn of events that Hepburn's wife Toni claims the experts will never be able to explain. "God answered prayers," she said smiling.

A damage assessment conducted by Bishop Ricard and Mark Dufva, executive director of Pensacola-Tallahassee Catholic Charities, set the disaster response plan into its final and most crucial motions. A weakened Dennis still left destruction in its path, but the decision was made to deploy resources from Miami and Venice, with the four other unaffected dioceses held in reserve.

During a Monday evening conference call Dufva and the bishop identified St. Rose of Lima in Milton and St. Ar in Gulf Breeze as the optimal sites for Turcotte to establish disaster relief centers.

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Deacon Turcotte's group arrived in Pensacola two days after the hurricane with gasoline, ice and water and enough food to provide 500 people with meals for three days. Catholic Charities of Venice completed its journey to Pensacola July 13 with more supplies. The other dioceses will be deployed only if further help is needed.

One of Hepburn's tasks is to provide each Catholic Charities employee and volunteer with an official State Emergency Response Team (SERT) badge.

"SERT badges will identify them to law enforcement so that they can stay out past curfew and get past road blocks," says Hepburn.

Deacon Turcotte says his priorities will be setting up relief stations at the two parishes and then training local staff in running the stations, conducting case management and recognizing signs of trauma.

"We're not just there to provide for physical needs," he says. "We need to make sure that emotional injuries get taken care of too."

Hepburn and officials at Catholic Charities USA hope that the Florida agreement will become a model for other states, particularly those in disaster-prone areas. Deacon Turcotte, however, is careful to note that Catholic Charities is not competing with traditional first responders, such as the American Red Cross.

"We deal with populations such as undocumented immigrants, who may fall between the cracks because they are afraid of government," he says. "They were vulnerable before the disaster and this gives us an opportunity to bring them into contact with the Catholic Charities social service net."

As the Miami and Venice agencies erect that net in Pensacola, Hepburn and the state's other Catholic Charities

directors continue to monitor the weather, wondering if one of those cloudy swirls in the Atlantic basin represents their turn for relief.

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