

Florida recovery picks up momentum, but dangers persist

September 15 2017, by Jennifer Kay And Tim Reynolds



Messages left on the sidewalk of the Rehabilitation Center of Hollywood Hills nursing home a day after eight people died and a criminal investigation by local agencies continued into how the rehab center allowed patients to stay without a working air condition system during the pass of Hurricane Irma through South Florida on Thursday, Sept. 14, 2017. (Pedro Portal/Miami Herald via AP)

Florida's post-Irma recovery picked up momentum Friday as power outages dropped and schools made plans to reopen. But two new cases of carbon monoxide poisoning from temporary generators made clear that

dangers remained nearly a week after the powerful storm hit.

In Palm Beach County, a woman died and three men were in critical condition after authorities said carbon monoxide fumes seeped in from a generator positioned just outside a home's garage on Thursday. A family of four was also being treated Friday near Miami for exposure to fumes from a generator outside of their apartment.

The state has also made urgent efforts to protect its vulnerable elderly residents after a string of nursing home deaths. Several nursing homes have been evacuated because of a lack of power or air conditioning, while utility workers raced to help facilities still lacking electricity. Homebound seniors found help from charities, churches and authorities.

Older people can be more susceptible to heat because their bodies do not adjust to temperatures as well as young people. They don't sweat as much, they are more likely to have medical conditions that change how the body responds to heat, and they are more likely to take medication that affects body temperature.

"They're more susceptible to the heat," said Broward County Commissioner Nan Rich. "The thing that hits them first is dehydration and then their temperature increases and then respiratory issues kick in. Then there's medication that needs to be refrigerated."



Vendetta Craig, who had left her 87-year-old mother Edna Jefferson in the care of the Rehabilitation Center of Hollywood Hills, speaks during a press conference flanked by from left- Dr. Randy Katz, Medical Director, Emergency Services, Memorial Regional Hospital, Judy Frum, RN, Chief Nursing Officer, Tracy Meltzer, director of nursing. The press conference took place a day after eight people died at the Rehabilitation Center of Hollywood Hills nursing home, a criminal investigation by local agencies continued into how the rehab center allowed patients to stay without a working air condition system during the pass of Hurricane Irma through South Florida on Thursday, Sept. 14, 2017. ((Pedro Portal/Miami Herald via AP)

On Thursday, 57 residents were moved from a suburban Fort Lauderdale assisted-living facility without power to two nearby centers where electricity was just restored. Owner Ralph Marrinson said all five of his Florida facilities lost power after Irma. Workers scrambled to keep patients cool with emergency stocks of ice and Popsicles.

Still, progress was being made. Statewide, 64 nursing homes were still waiting for full power Thursday, a number that had dropped by nearly 20 from the previous day, according to the Florida Health Care Association.

Homebound seniors were also a concern. The Greater Miami Jewish Federation encouraged people to evacuate before the storm if they could, but the group has shifted its focus to checking on them and bringing supplies to their homes, said CEO Jacob Solomon.



Janice Connelly of Hollywood, sets up a makeshift memorial in memory of the senior citizens who died in the heat at The Rehabilitation Center at Hollywood Hills, Fla. (Carline Jean /South Florida Sun-Sentinel via AP)

"At this point we're better off taking care of them where they are. They didn't leave then. They're not going to leave now. What are you going to do? You go, you check on them, you make sure they have water and

food and that's it," he said. "You're not going to convince a 95-year-old Holocaust survivor to do something that she doesn't want to do."

By Friday morning, most Floridians who lost their electricity after the storm had gotten it back. State emergency managers said the number of outages dropped to 1.9 million homes and businesses.

Schools in some hard-hit areas were also able to start making plans to welcome back students. Lee County schools Superintendent Greg Adkins announced classes will begin Sept. 25 after most of the district's buildings received at least minor damage. Three needed extensive roof repair.



Evacuees at a special needs shelter sit and chat or rest, Thursday, Sept. 14, 2017, at Florida International University in Miami, Fla. About 30 people, including staff with the Florida Keys Outreach Coalition for the Homeless from Key West, Fla., were sheltered in a storefront underneath a parking garage on campus. (AP

Photo/Wilfredo Lee)

At least 33 people have died in the U.S. under Irma-related circumstances, the vast majority in Florida. The death toll across the Caribbean stood at 38.

On Thursday, detectives were at the Rehabilitation Center at Hollywood Hills after receiving a search warrant to investigate the eight patients' deaths, which police believed were heat-related.

The ex-husband of 71-year-old victim Gail Nova said her devastated family believes the facility should lose its license.



Kudy Ann Bell spends her time coloring at a special needs shelter, Thursday, Sept. 14, 2017, at Florida International University in Miami, Fla. About 30

people, including staff with the Florida Keys Outreach Coalition for the Homeless from Key West, Fla., were sheltered in a storefront underneath a parking garage on campus. (AP Photo/Wilfredo Lee)

"Someone's got to answer for this. Someone let the ball drop very, very far," Kenneth Nova said by phone from his home in Winter Haven.

"Whoever was in charge, whoever was responsible, needs to be called onto the carpet for it."

The center said the hurricane knocked out a transformer that powered the air conditioning. Broward County said the home alerted officials about the situation Tuesday, but when asked if it had any medical needs or emergencies, it did not request help.

But by early Wednesday, the center had placed three calls to report patients in distress, prompting firefighters to search the facility. They found three people dead and evacuated 145 people to hospitals, many on stretchers or in wheelchairs, authorities said. By that afternoon, five more had died.



Christopher Taylor walks through the flood waters from Hurricane Irma as his uncles trailer is pulled out of the water on his families land off Lake Shore Drive in Gainesville, Fla., Thursday Sept. 14, 2017. (Brad McClenny/The Gainesville Sun via AP)

Florida Gov. Rick Scott announced Thursday night that he directed the Agency for Health Care Administration to terminate the center as a provider for Medicaid, which provides health care for low-income individuals and families.

"It is clear that this facility cannot be responsible for Florida's vulnerable patients, and therefore the State will stop them from providing care," Scott said in a news release.

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