



## **Reflections on Hurricane Ian Our community's Remarkable Resilience**

**By Nancy Johnson, CEO  
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Now that the dust is starting to settle...it is time to reflect on the many selfless acts witnessed during the aftermath of Hurricane Ian. The storm has provided us with an opportunity to remember what this community is all about...neighbor helping neighbor. When we moved here in 2004, only two weeks after Hurricane Charley, we made new friends by helping our neighbors pick their roof tiles out of their pools! Now 18 years later, Punta Gorda did better, having been hardened after Charley and built to tougher codes. Older homes in our county, especially in areas of Port Charlotte and Englewood did not fare as well.

Immediately after the storm our amazing nonprofit community was in action, providing essential services. Many of these agencies had sustained damage to their own property and needed assistance to get up and running. Many of the newly homeless are those who have never needed assistance before. A national disaster relief organization called Rubicon moved in and started helping right away with chain saws, removing fallen trees and tarping roofs. The usually dignified office space at the Charlotte Community Foundation (CCF) where we have our TEAM Punta Gorda office, became a dormitory for the Rubicon cots and their center of operations. Concurrently, in the CCF courtyard, a Volunteer Reception Center (VRC) was established quickly to support the agencies providing relief.



COAD (Communities Organized After Disaster) is a group of Charlotte County community organizations, working together during a disaster to provide coordination of services to ensure that unmet needs are addressed, provide financial assistance and supplies, and to share knowledge and resources with Charlotte County residents during a disaster. COAD members include faith-based, non-profits, volunteer groups, and

government agencies. COADFL was originally established as a response to the COVID-19 crisis. The founding partners were the Charlotte Community Foundation, The Gulf Coast Partnership, The United Way, and TEAM Punta Gorda. This readiness enabled The COAD team to respond quickly and in a targeted manner. A volunteer database was established right from the start. This provided the means to match volunteers with needs. Volunteers at the VRC were quickly identifying agency needs and shipping volunteers out the back door as fast as they came into the front! Staff from Pinellas County came to lend a hand.

In the days following the storm, the focus has been on supporting direct service to residents and families impacted by Ian. Food, shelter, and relief were the priorities. Agencies such as the Homeless Coalition, Saint Vincent DePaul, Meals on Wheels, Operation Barbeque, and the YMCA as well as area churches are still carrying out these functions. COAD Florida continues to support them. Those wanting to help, can still call the hotline, now managed through Florida Connect. This site also has information about connecting with FEMA resources.

There have also been some efforts to start to put the town back together again. One such effort was a group of neighbors who formed an ad hoc clean-up crew called the Park Warriors and began the momentous task of cleaning up our public spaces. City staff had their hands full with public safety and seawall damage and were grateful for the help. Kudos to them, and to the TEAM Punta Gorda volunteers who helped!

Ironically, on the very day that hurricane Ian swept through our town stripping every piece of landscaping from the downtown, our Punta Gorda in Bloom volunteers won the national America in Bloom award for Best City in its population category. Awards were presented at the *America in Bloom* national symposium in St. Louis. Neighboring Venice, in the next highest population category, won an award as well.

Thanks to Hurricane Ian the beautiful plantings that graced our downtown are shredded, but the Punta Gorda in Bloom team is already working on replanting. Thanks to the generous donation of temporary space at the Peace River Botanical Gardens, whose own displays were seriously damaged, plants are being readied to fill the pots again.

The spirit of this city goes so far beyond the physical spaces in the community. A great deal of the outcome from Ian was due to systems put in place previously and lessons learned from earlier storms. The fact is that we operate under really fine leadership. It's what makes this such a special place to live, work and play.

If you would like to share some of your time or talent in our community, we invite you to learn more about TEAM by visiting our website at [www.teampuntagorda.org](http://www.teampuntagorda.org). Or contact us directly by calling 941-637-8326.