

# County Employees Were the Unsung Backbone of Hurricane Response

By Mary Shelley

When a hurricane threatens Charlotte County, most residents rush to secure their homes and check evacuation routes. For county employees, the approach of a storm means something else: activation. Across departments — from Public Safety and Emergency Management to Public Works, Community Services, Transit, Facilities, IT, Human Services, Utilities, and Communications — county workers pivot into emergency roles that keep people safe and critical services running.

Once the Emergency Operations Center is activated, staff are reassigned into round-the-clock shifts. Calltakers field questions about evacuations, shelters and road closures. Communications teams push verified alerts and recovery guidance, including text updates our messaging service, while emergency managers coordinate resources with local, state and federal partners.

A hallmark of Charlotte County's approach is providing sheltering options to the community. Depending on storm size and track, county-staffed public shelters open and are operated by teams drawn from departments across the organization.

Ian's destruction reshaped local emergency playbooks. County employees supported shelters, coordinated debris removal, and stood up recovery programs that have continued for years, guiding projects from housing stabilization to infrastructure repairs. That sustained, cross-department effort remains the template for future activations.

Last fall, back-to-back systems tested our readiness again. Hurricanes Helene and Milton impacted our local area in quick succession, forcing rapid sheltering decisions and resource shifts just days apart.

Behind the scenes, planners, logistics leads and GIS analysts synthesize weather updates, damage reports and resource requests to decide where to send crews and how to prioritize needs. In the field, Public Works clears debris and reopens corridors for ambulances and utility repair trucks. Transit repositions vehicles to move residents safely. Facilities teams secure generators and maintain shelter operations. Community Services and Human Services staff guide families through intake, basic care and referrals.

The "essential" label isn't just about showing up before or during landfall. It's about perseverance in the long tail of recovery — weeks or months of debris operations, infrastructure repairs, housing assistance and case management that follow.

Hurricanes reveal the quiet strength of Charlotte County's workforce. They are library technicians greeting evacuees at shelter doors. Facilities techs are keeping generators humming. IT specialists are protecting communication lifelines. Caseworkers are connecting families to services. Utilities crews are working to restore disrupted water service. Their work — largely unseen — turns emergency plans into lifesaving action.

As another storm season unfolds, residents can take comfort in a simple truth: when the county sounds the activation call, Charlotte County employees are already moving — neighbors

helping neighbors, determined to protect lives and livelihoods until the skies clear and recovery is underway.

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