Hurricane Michael's Impact on People With HIV—and How You Can Help

A prominent AIDS organization in Panama City, Florida, can't reach its clients in rural counties.

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It has been a little over a week since Hurricane Michael made landfall in Florida's panhandle, and although much of attention from the national media has gone away, the true and lasting damage caused by the storm is just now beginning to be understood. While the jarring physical destruction wrought by Hurricane Michael has already been well documented, there has also been a less visible, but equally damaging, havoc created by the hurricane and inflicted on vulnerable communities along the Gulf Coast which deserves our attention and support.

Hurricane Michael may have swept away all but the naked foundations of homes and businesses as it passed through the panhandle, but it did not take with it the health care and housing needs of the Floridians who remained, among whose number included many people living with HIV who are left to wonder not only where they will be able sleep tonight, but also where their next dose of antiretroviral medication will come from.

BASIC NWFL, an AIDS service organization based out of Panama City, Florida, is currently struggling to deal with the direct physical impact of Hurricane Michael and the myriad ancillary damages that were brought in its wake. BASIC NWFL is headquartered in Bay County, which was where Hurricane Michael first came ashore and did the most physical damage, but it also serves 5 other, predominantly rural, surrounding counties. Ironically, it is in Bay County, which was hit hardest by the storm, where BASIC NWFL is best able to serve their clients living with HIV. Distance, not structural damage, is proving the largest impediment to care so far.

"We're working with the local AIDS Drug Assistance Programs to get medications here for our clients by Friday," BASIC NWFL Executive Director Valerie Mincey told AIDS United over the phone earlier this week. "If clients can get here, they can get their medications, but a lot of the roads aren't clear and many of our clients don't have access to transportation."

Right now, BASIC NWFL is trying to work with PanCare of Florida, a local Federally Qualified Health Center, to gain access to one of their mobile medical units that would enable them to go out into the more rural areas they serve and provide care for their clients, but they currently don't have the financial resources they need to pay for the gas and extra staffing required to effectively utilize the mobile unit.

“These people don’t even know when they’re going to have access to water or power right now,” said Mincey of her rural clients. “5 of the 6 counties we serve are rural counties with no access to the type of health care people need right now, there are no working pharmacies in 4 of the 6 counties we serve, and the health departments in those counties have been damaged or destroyed. We need to be able to reach these people as soon as possible.”

Fortunately, there are 2 easy ways for people all across the country to help out people living with HIV who have been impacted by Hurricane Michael in the Florida panhandle. The first way is to go to BASIC NWFL’s website a provide them with a direct donation that will help them pay for the gas needed to take the mobile unit to clients in affected rural counties and to employ a pharmacy tech that is required for them to dispense HIV medications. The second way is to donate to AIDS United’s Disaster Relief Fund, which is currently accepting donations and will be sending out a request for grant applications very soon for any organization that has a plan to meet the immediate and urgent needs of people living with HIV who have been affected by the devastation of Hurricane Michael. Check back with AIDS United’s blog regularly for updates.

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