



IRMA SHEDS LIGHT ON UNMET NEEDS IN IMMOKALEE

by Dawn Monteclavo
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Hurricane Irma was one of the greatest challenges we have faced as a community over the years, yet it brought to light the resiliency of so many people, particularly the residents of Immokalee. One of the hardest hit areas, Immokalee, is a rural, agricultural city bordering the Everglades where 41.6 percent of the population lives below the federal poverty level, among the highest in the state of Florida.

For most of us, Irma is a bad memory from 2017, but for a majority of families in Immokalee, recovery has yet to come, and it may take up to five years. Sadly, the storm took nearly everything from those who had very little to begin with. Many people lost their homes, mostly uninsurable trailers, and the fields where so many residents work were flooded or scoured by wind. With families to support and mouths to feed, the community cried out for help.

In the hours and days after the storm, families came to Guadalupe Center for help, and I'm proud that our team was there to assist. Since Irma, our mission of breaking the cycle of poverty through education has never felt more empowering to me, our donors and those we serve. Guadalupe Center has been a place of "normalcy" for our families, providing a safe, nurturing environment where they are cared for, fed and educated while their parents work to rebuild their lives.

After Irma, we quickly realized that we couldn't do it alone. Guadalupe Center and other local agencies reached out to one another in a way that we'd not done before. United with the same mission, we collaborated to help desperate families, forming the Immokalee Unmet Needs Coalition to provide better communication and coordination among the agencies serving those hit hardest by the hurricane.

The Coalition includes a collaboration of non-profit, faith based, local, state and national organizations whose mission is to assist in identifying the unmet needs of those affected by disaster in Immokalee. Focused on long-term recovery, the Coalition is conducting street-by-street needs assessments, coordinating and managing requests for support, providing updated resources and donations to families, managing volunteer groups, addressing immediate and long-term housing needs and coordinating spiritual and emotional care as well.

Many of our Guadalupe staff and families were among

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those who lost everything. Rosie, who works in our kitchen, grabbed her family and just a few belongings before Irma hit. Thankfully, they fled their home in time, as their trailer was literally split in half during the storm. Through the Immokalee Unmet Needs Coalition, we are working hard to find them, and others in similar situations, appropriate housing.

When we look around most of our communities, it's hard to imagine that the aftermath of Irma still exists in pockets of our greater community. But just miles east of Naples, we see it, every day.

Rosie is just one of the many families we serve who were displaced, and are still living in unsafe conditions. They rely on their wages to find housing, cover repair costs or replace lost essentials, and thanks to our generous donors and the Immokalee Unmet Needs Coalition, we continue to connect them with resources to get them back on their feet.

It's been heartwarming to see so many organizations come together to support families, including our own supporters and those as far away as California. When volunteers with the Center for Cultural and Naturalist Studies, Inc. saw Irma's devastation, they came to town to help. They took to the neighborhoods and identified those in need, providing new beds for a five-year-old and his little sister, both students at Guadalupe Center's Early Childhood Education Center.

While we've seen what devastation looks like, we continue to be encouraged by the resilient spirit of the people in this community and those who are giving a helping hand. To find out how you can assist, visit www.guadalupecenter.org, or call 239.657.7711. As they recover, rebuild, and grow beyond the stigma of poverty, Immokalee still needs our help.