After hurricanes, pharmacists help patients with changed lives recover

Harvey. Irma. Maria. After these historic storms left devastation in their wake, pharmacists are picking up the pieces for patients, helping their communities, and traveling to help others.

Texas
Hurricane Harvey made landfall in Texas on August 25. Pharmacists donated medications and volunteered their time around the clock to help Harvey evacuees at locations such as the NRG Stadium and the George R. Brown Convention Center in flooded Houston; pharmacists worked with the Texas State Board of Pharmacy to allow for emergency remote pharmacy licenses. Pharmacists and student pharmacists worked side by side with other health care providers.

Pharmacists who usually would administer three to five Tdap vaccinations per week were administering more than 1,000 per day, said Texas Pharmacy Association CEO Debbie Garza, RPh, in an October 6 e-mail.

Doug Read, PharmD, is an H-E-B pharmacist based in San Antonio. As director of pharmacy compliance and regulatory affairs for H-E-B, Read traveled to hard-hit towns near and on the Texas coast.

“Receive Texas back on their feet,” Read said. As he spoke on September 11, every one of H-E-B’s stores was open, with the exception of three. Of those three, one had a pharmacy. They will be rebuilt.

Florida
After Hurricane Irma left a trail of destruction going up Florida, LCDR Ryan G. Pett, PharmD, BCPS, a U.S. Public Health Service (USPHS) clinical pharmacist based at Yakama Indian Health Clinic in Toppenish, WA, was the pharmacy branch chief of a team at a shelter in Lehigh Acres, FL. The shelter had no sewage, no potable water, and generators but no city power. “The local pharmacists in Florida were amazing,” Pett said. “They helped us navigate the supply shortages and helped us to find formulary alternatives for these patients.”

CDR Quocbao Pham, PharmD, BCPS, USPHS, based at FDA near Washington, DC, arrived in Orlando, FL, on a military flight just before Irma struck on September 10. The next day, Pham observed on the bus ride south that “the damage was noticeably worse and worse. Downed trees, signs toppled over. The water was still fairly high.”

At special needs shelters in Naples and Miami, Pham provided pill boxes and did medication counseling. He also administered influenza vaccinations that were coordinated with a nearby community pharmacy.

“It’s hard to describe the desperation people have,” Pham said. “Their homes no longer exist, and their entire life has completely changed.”

Puerto Rico
After Hurricane Maria, pharmacists and pharmacy staff in Puerto Rico “have lost their homes and need … food, fuel, water, clothing, and shelter,” said Justin Coyle, PharmD, senior director of pharmacy operations at Walgreens. “Not only are they experiencing the storm as residents of Puerto Rico, they’re helping their community, and they’re helping their patients.”

As Puerto Rico is challenged to rebuild infrastructure, pharmacies are “becoming critical access points for health care in the community,” he said. Phones and internet connectivity are at best intermittent, so Walgreens pharmacists and pharmacy staff are working with patients, prescribers, and other pharmacies—all pharmacies—to get patients their medications.

“Puerto Rico has more than 700 independent pharmacies, and more than one-half are giving support to their communities,” Puerto Rico resident Nelly Conte, EdD, MMS, RPh, said in an October 18 e-mail. “Some cannot process the prescription to third parties because there is no internet, and still pharmacies provide their medications to their patients.”

Diana Yap, editorial director