

organizations focused on 'helping thy neighbor'

Rebeca C. Trujillo

The recent threat from hurricane Dorian to South Florida and the devastation it caused in the Bahamas are a harsh reminder of the level of preparedness required to withstand such storms and the work that follows to recover from even an indirect hit.

Miami-Dade countians learned valuable preparation and rebuilding lessons from hurricane Andrew in 1992 and subsequent storms; this was clear throughout our community, as Dorian moved closer to our state, that they are no longer taking the "it won't happen to us" attitude nor waiting until the last minute to implement emergency plans to protect their families, homes and businesses.

aiding the most vulnerable

The welfare of local senior citizens and disabled residents, among the most vulnerable during these emergencies, is always a major concern, since many require some degree of daily assistance and care.

Carlos L. Martinez, president and CEO of United HomeCare, South Florida's leading non-profit home health and community care organization, explained that his company follows a comprehensive emergency plan to secure the residents at The Residences of United HomeCare, its assisted living facility in southwest Kendall, as well as thousands of patients living in their own homes.

"Our entire team, including more than 800 health aides, goes into full alert mode, coordinating the home-care services and other needs for our patients, especially those with limited mobility or who are bed-bound."

During Dorian, for example, UHC



The public doesn't realize just how positive the outcome of adapting a home to a patient's needs is until they experience it first hand. Changes like handrails and wheelchair ramps make life easier and safer.

administrators and supervisors were in constant contact with the Miami-Dade Emergency Operations Center (MDEOC), as well as with the state's Emergency Management team in Tallahassee, to monitor the storm's projected path and actual movement.

Had its projected path brought it over or close enough to affect Miami, UHC's emergency plan calls for home aids to visit their respective in-home clients to evaluate their needs, ensuring that the patient's health and con-

ditions at the dwelling were optimal (not requiring evacuation) and that water, food, medications and vital supplies for 7 days to two weeks are available as per emergency management recommendations.

UHC home aids would resume patient visits as soon as weather and on-the-ground conditions allow.

The Residences, on the other hand, is fully equipped to withstand the storm and its aftermath. Designed and built as a Category 5 proof struc-



The Residences of United HomeCare, located in southwest Kendall, was designed and built as a Category 5 proof structure and is fully equipped to withstand the storms and their aftermath.

make a significant impact on the most vulnerable

ture with hurricane-proof windows and doors, the building sits on land that's 11 feet above the water table. It has a 400-kW natural gas-powered generator, constantly fueled with underground supply lines that runs the building's vital services.

The Residences is adjacent to West Kendall Baptist Hospital, placing it within Florida Power & Light's priority grid during power outages.

In case of an emergency, the facility's on-site personnel, which includes administrators, nurses, assistants, kitchen, and other service staff, would make sure that residents have sufficient medications and that all health-related equipment is operational. Its fully equipped kitchen would be supplied in advance with enough food and water for the duration.

"The Residences of United Home Care was built as a life-preserving bunker," says Carlos Martinez. "It provides our residents and their families peace of mind during a time of great stress and uncertainty."

The building is also prepared to serve as United HomeCare's headquarters after the emergency should a hurricane inflict damage on the company's offices in Doral.

s.t.e.p.s. towards recovery, self-sufficiency

Should a tropical storm or hurricane impact South Florida directly, United HomeCare's patients and their families or caretakers would likely need help with damage claims and financial assistance applications, property damage containment and recovery.

Enter S.T.E.P.S. In The Right Direction, Inc., a Miami-based non-profit organization that serves indigent,

low-income and working poor older adults, persons with disabilities, family caregivers, families with children, refugees, and hard-to-serve groups, and a working partner of UHC.

Since 2000, S.T.E.P.S. has specialized in housing improvement and environmental modification services; disaster mitigation; roof and home repairs; debris clean-up, removal and disposal; consumable supplies assistance, and more.

"S.T.E.P.S. was actually a brainchild of two community leaders, Vivian Earline Ledbetter, who has since passed, and myself," explains its president, Michael Salem.



S.T.E.P.S.'s Michael Salem and UHC's Carlos Martinez

The organization began as a refugee resettlement assistance provider, making sure newcomers received the resources—food, clothes and other donations—and information they needed to resettle—where children could go to school and adults find a job—and become self-sufficient.

"We worked as volunteers and also brought in funding that eventually led to hiring a lot of people in South Florida, some of them were the very refugees we helped resettle," Salem continues. "We started off with a

small operation like anybody else. I have a background in writing proposals, grants, looking for funding out there; so I wrote first five proposals and after that we got funded. Once we got money to do something, we did it well, were able to keep accountability of every dollar, and how effective we were."

If helping people achieve self-sufficiency was S.T.E.P.S.' driving force in the early days, today the organization has a wider scope of services to help the neediest in our community.

These services range from assisting individuals who may not have health insurance identify a community clinic where they can receive primary care, to retrofitting a home for seniors and physically/mentally disabled patients with wheelchair ramps, railings, bathtub handles, and similar accessories.

"And we make sure that every single job is done right, so that patients are safe and at least have a home with dignity," says Salem.

Most of the projects S.T.E.P.S. is engaged in today revolve around construction: Home repair and improvement as well as rebuilding.

"We want to bring stability into that industry, making sure that every job is done in a way that our partners, like United HomeCare, can assure their clients and patients that they will continue to stay in their homes."

S.T.E.P.S. is ready to handle small and large construction projects. It is part of Rebuild Florida, a program of the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity (DEO) created to help Florida's long-term recovery efforts from recent hurricanes, with a con-

tract for more than 250 homes in Miami-Dade and Monroe counties.

Although its predominant market is mainly Miami-Dade and Monroe, recently S.T.E.P.S. launched a massive program in 14 Florida counties, 12 of them in the state's southern region, where it will repair or re-build homes impacted by hurricane Irma.

"These homes need to be repaired," Salem explains. "In some cases, the families have insurance, but policies may not have windstorm coverage or water damage coverage in the event of flooding. So, the state of Florida, through its Department of Economic Opportunities, and FEMA determine which individuals really qualify for assistance from FEMA."

Once approved, the cases are submitted to Rebuild Florida, which assigns qualified contractors to do the work and monitors the process.

"They [Rebuild Florida] award us the funds to rebuild these homes."

Given its previous experience and this project's scope, Mr. Salem says that the organization is considering expanding into construction of new residential units for the neediest members of our community.

understanding the patients' needs is key

But however S.T.E.P.S. may grow, he confirms, his team will continue to provide local partners, like United HomeCare, the environment modification and housing improvement services their elderly or disabled patients and clients may require.

"We have partnered with UHC for over six years now, and it is important for us to continue to serve the most vulnerable within our community,



S.T.E.P.S. In The Right Direction provides housing improvement and environmental modification services as well as disaster mitigation, interior/exterior home and roof repairs, and heavy clean-up services.

the disabled and the elderly, as well as their families and caretakers."

The public, he says, doesn't realize just how positive the outcome of adapting a home to a patient's needs is until they experience it first hand.

"They (patients) need changes in the house that let them stay by themselves, to be as self-sufficient as possible, without the having the benefit of caregiver."

And even when a family member, friend or home aid is needed as a

caregiver, a wheelchair ramp or other adjustments in the kitchen, bathroom and bedroom prove to be invaluable.

"We want to make sure that we make life easier and safer for patients by making environmental changes that will also ease the caretakers' job."

Understanding a patient's condition and risks as well as his or her surroundings is key, which is why partnering with United HomeCare, the lead management agency for thousands of patients in Miami-Dade County, makes a huge difference for the S.T.E.P.S. team.

"They basically paved the way for groups like ours to do what we do effectively. We work with United Home Care for one reason and one reason only: They set the standard when it comes to quality of services for seniors and people in need," Michael Salem concludes. "If people want to know how to access the best, most reliable care for themselves or their loved ones, United HomeCare is *the* standard in South Florida."

As a storm approaches, UHC's 800-plus health aides go into full alert mode, ensuring that the needs of their patients, especially those with limited mobility or who are bed-bound, are met.