



Heart to Heart
INTERNATIONAL



HURRICANE IRMA RESPONSE



Hurricane Irma raged on the heels of Hurricane Harvey, battering the Florida Keys and making landfall on September 10. Waterways swelled 10 to 15 feet in some areas, destroying roads, knocking out power and leaving vegetation stripped all over the string of islands.

In early September, as forecasters began plotting the storm's path, Heart to Heart International made plans to mobilize. The Mobile Medical Unit was in use in the response to Hurricane Harvey, so a HHI team drove it to Florida, to be in place after Irma finished its punishing course over the state.

On September 13, an advance team including Dr. Gary Morsch, co-founder of HHI, arrived on a flight donated by Angel Flight Central to assess the needs of the area. The MMU arrived in Florida shortly after and began seeing patients in Estero, Florida, south of Ft. Myers, before it headed to the Keys.

FEMA estimated 25 percent of the homes in the Keys were destroyed and 65 percent sustained damage. Power was knocked out, as was cell communication. When the giant storm surged washed over the island, it flooded cars and trucks, leaving many people without any form of transportation. Though Governor Scott issued a mandatory evacuation order for parts of Florida, including the Keys, approximately 10,000 residents of the Keys stayed.

Big Pine Key island was widely acknowledged to have taken the brunt of the Category 4 storm's punishment, and access to the Keys was severely limited, but HHI obtained the documentation needed to enter the area.

HHI team members were the first medical responders in the lower Keys, and the team began seeing patients in the MMU on the side of Highway 1 in Big Pine Key, before the highway reopened to residents returning to the Keys.

Arnie Graham was one of the residents who stayed in the Keys during the storm and then made his way to HHI's MMU. He scraped his leg on coral rock while cleaning up damage. "You are not supposed to do anything dumb during a hurricane," he said. "And, I did."

He arrived at Heart to Heart International's Mobile Medical Unit to have his scrapes cleaned and receive a tetanus shot. He blamed himself for getting hurt, but Kathy Bracken, HHI volunteer, reassured him, "That's why it's called an accident, and that's why we're here."

Cooperation and connections are essential in the aftermath of a disaster. And HHI is proud to serve the residents of an area impacted by disaster in myriad ways. In Florida, that included transporting some hot, fresh Kansas City barbeque from Marathon, Florida, to people in Big Pine. HHI picked it up and delivered it to an organization providing clothes and food to residents in need. The organization was happy to receive fresh barbeque to serve to people, many of whom hadn't eaten a hot meal since Irma struck.

With cell service down and power knocked out, communication proved to be a challenge. Sometimes, it was word of mouth or the sight of the big MMU by the side of the road that alerted people to HHI's presence.



That's how James "Mac" McCaw ended up being treated at the MMU. He lived alone and had started feeling lightheaded after the storm. When his neighbor was picking up food, water and ice, from the National Guard, she spotted Heart to Heart's Mobile Medical Unit directly across Highway 1. She stopped by to inquire if she could bring Mac by to get checked out. "Of course, bring him by!" was the immediate response.

The Heart to Heart International team continued seeing patients for the next two weeks. Team members went into the communities to find people who needed help but couldn't reach the MMU. HHI also coordinated vaccination clinics, including one in which HHI team members vaccinated members of the Monroe County Sheriff's department.

With crews restoring more power and healthcare facilities returning to service, Heart to Heart International wrapped up its response on September 24, glad to have provided needed medical services to residents of the Keys immediately after the storm.

