

# 'We Know How to Do This'

## **In the aftermath of floods or fires, tornadoes or hurricanes, VFW is known as a reliable resource for those most vulnerable**

Dec 14, 2023

Since the VFW's inception nearly 125 years ago, its members' pursuance to help communities ravaged by natural disasters remains undeterred.

Under the VFW mantle, veterans from across the country annually carry out missions to combat the harsh aftermath of floods, wildfires, typhoons or hurricanes ravaging communities.

Most recently, in early August, when wildfires ravaged portions of Maui in the Hawaiian Islands, VFW members worked together to provide relief. Especially impacted by the fires was Lahaina, once the capital of Hawaii.

VFW Post 3850 on Maui quickly mobilized as a distribution point for community members.

Post 3850 Commander Alton Sanders said the VFW team of volunteers has done everything they know to do to help, including offering a caring shoulder.

Sanders noted one veteran who got in touch with the Post for assistance. The vet had lost his wife in the fire and was still in shock. In planning her funeral, he realized he had nothing to wear to her funeral. Sanders made sure he had what he needed. Most importantly, Sanders said, was just "being there" for the veteran to talk about his wife.

"Some of these stories are mind-blowing," Sanders said. "It is like a war zone here with no bullets."

VFW volunteers have partnered with the local Sea Cadets and their parents in picking up 14-15 pallets of supplies, which are delivered to the Post and inventoried.

Then, when people come to the Post home or call, volunteers will know if they have what is

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needed.

“We are trying to keep this organized because this is going to be a long haul,” Sanders said. “If someone is unable to find a ride to the Post to pick up supplies, one of us delivers to wherever they are staying.”

Being on the opposite side of the island from where the fires spread, Post 3850 was unscathed. However, one of the Post members living in Lahaina lost everything in the fire, according to Sanders.

“Lahaina is the heart of the island,” Sanders said. “It is devastating the way he went up in flames. I have visited 49 of the 50 states, and I have never seen a community come together like Maui has.”

Here is a look back at some disaster relief endeavors performed by VFW members over the past couple of years.

#### **‘NO BOUNDARIES’ WHEN IT COMES TO SERVING**

On Dec. 10, 2021, a tornado ripped through multiple towns in Kentucky, killing 57 people and injuring hundreds more. As VFW members do, they quickly organized efforts to help those affected.

A relentless network of VFW Post members in Kentucky answered the call to action, quickly creating fundraising efforts, food and supply storage as well as driving in and out of the areas hit hardest to provide such relief.

VFW Post 1170 in Louisville, Kentucky, organized to gather and transport supplies to Bowling Green, one of the communities in the path of destruction.

“I drove a truck down as Post and Auxiliary members would load the other truck,” then-VFW Post 1170 Commander Calvin Shaak Jr. said. “So I was able to jump into the now full truck and go again.”

Shaak worked closely with then-VFW Post 1298 Commander Glenn Skaggs in Bowling Green.

“Glenn set up his Post as a distribution point, working around the clock to ensure people who needed anything could get it,” Shaak said. “He worked tirelessly, receiving, unloading and coordinating to get added help and storage containers as support was coming in quicker than he could get it out at first. He also worked with local government offices to get supplies to people in need.”

This network of Posts answered the call to action once again when an unfortunate cycle of

flash flooding happened between late July and early August 2022.

“We are not only here for veterans, but to serve the community in their time of need,” then-VFW Department of Kentucky Commander Nathan Sesco said at the time. “Commander Ryan Buchanan with VFW Post 6291 helped bring in supplies, and I know Post 5829 Quartermaster Tony Adams and Kentucky State Police trooper Jay Perkins from Post 1178 in Harlan were in the water on boats and rescued more than 20 people in Whitesburg.”

In the days following the December 2021 tornado in Kentucky, the Department of Michigan raised and donated \$17,000, as well as two semitrucks and three trailer loads of emergency supplies worth about \$500,000.

A few months later, then-Department of Michigan Commander Kevin Conklin attended the Department of Kentucky’s Mid-Winter Conference to present more donations from Michigan Posts, which totaled more than \$18,000.

This effort was spearheaded by VFW Post 1138 in Monroe, Michigan, with the backing of Conklin and other Department of Michigan officers who traveled to Kentucky with the supplies.

“It’s all one organization regardless of geography,” Conklin said. “There are no boundaries for a veteran to serve another veteran.”

### **‘WE TAKE CARE OF OUR NEIGHBORS’**

When Hurricane Ida struck the Louisiana coastline in August 2021, causing the most widespread damage to the state since the infamous Hurricane Katrina in 2005, several VFW Posts from across the state provided a local lifeline for many.

In New Orleans, then-VFW Post 8973 Commander Chris Cox prepared for the worst, anticipating his Post would serve as an anchor of hope for fellow Louisianans once the hurricane passed.

“Down here in Louisiana, we take care of our neighbors,” said Cox, a retired Marine Corps master sergeant with more than 20 years in the service.

“It’s not about being the hero of the neighborhood. It’s a matter of caring for each other.”

Through word of mouth and Cox’s connections within the community, the Post secured ample donations from residents and restaurants. Among the donations were freezers, refrigerators, food and supplies.

“We were taking whatever we got and turning it into meals,” Cox said. “For anyone passing by, work crews, tired residents cleaning up their damaged homes, we were there. For many,

this was the first hot meal they had in days.”

For multiple days, Post members served lunch and dinner, distributing more than 1,800 meals to those in need. The Post also secured more than \$25,000 worth of food, fuel, dry goods, baby food and sanitary supplies, which they distributed throughout the areas outside of New Orleans hardest hit by Hurricane Ida.

“Disasters like this are a very familiar environment to veterans,” Cox added. “Lots of us have provided humanitarian relief in the Middle East, Haiti and other places, so we know how to do this.”

Like the efforts in New Orleans, Post 7286 in Covington, Louisiana, opened its doors to locals in need of food, water, electricity and shelter for those needing a place to rest.

“Our doors were open 24 hours a day, seven days a week,” said Post 7286 Commander Michael Henry. “We wanted to let our community know that they were not in this fight alone. We got your back.”

In West St. Charles, Louisiana, VFW Post 3750 was severely damaged but was still up and running as a community distribution location. With donated food, Post members also prepared meals for first responders, out-of-town linemen and residents. Louisiana’s District 5 also donated supplies to the Post to aid in relief efforts.

### **VFW POST SERVES AS EMERGENCY SHELTER**

It is through word of mouth and a reputation for serving their community that members of VFW Post 2290 in Manville, New Jersey, were called upon in the wake of severe flooding and fires.

Although Hurricane Ida made landfall near the Gulf of Mexico, the remnants of the hurricane reached Manville, about 40 miles southwest of Newark, New Jersey, where floodwaters led to gas-fed fires and left many areas unreachable.

In desperate need of help, the Manville Office of Emergency Management and the Red Cross called on Post 2290 to serve as a distribution center and later an emergency shelter for those in need of a place to rest.

“Because of the location of the Post, which is above the area that normally floods and the large size of our building, it makes us an ideal distribution center,” said then-Post 2290 Commander Andy Henkel. “More importantly, we follow the motto ‘No One Does More.’”

Between Sept. 1 and Sept. 5, the Post received an overwhelming amount of donations ranging from clothing, food, and water to infant supplies and cleaning materials. With distribution help from its members, Auxiliary and other local volunteers, the Post provided

two meals daily and at one point harbored more than 340 people in need of a place to sleep.

“In the almost 90 years of our existence, we have been fortunate to be in a position to assist those who have suffered major disasters,” Henkel added.

“In our most recent past, I can remember Hurricane Floyd, Irene and Sandy. We were open for various numbers of days and housed and fed comparable numbers of residents. So for us, this is normal, though unfortunate.”

### **VETERANS ‘CONTINUE TO SERVE’**

When an EF-3-rated tornado devastated the Nashville, Tennessee, area and killed at least 25 people in the early morning hours of March 3, 2020, VFW Post 1970 in West Nashville immediately started disaster relief efforts.

“We got the word out to receive donations on social media and by contacting Nashville media outlets,” then-Post 1970 Commander John Lambert said. “We received many donations. Most of them came from people who said they heard about our efforts from the TV and radio stations.”

Lambert said his Post was able to quickly organize because of social media outlets.

“I would say that the best way to communicate information to the public during a disaster is through social media,” he said. “It’s a media source that you can control, and people can spread the word for you. It’s the easiest way to quickly get the word out to a large amount of people.”

Lambert said there were about 25 volunteers from the VFW Department of Tennessee; the Department’s Districts 6 and 7; Post 6022 in Tuscaloosa, Alabama; and other organizations.

Donnie Nelson, then-commander of Post 6022, said that when he learned about the Nashville tornado, he wanted to help with any VFW-led relief efforts.

“Our mission at VFW is to help veterans, and that is what we strive to do,” Nelson said. “As veterans, it helps us to continue to serve.”

These stories exemplify how time and again VFW members rally against danger to protect, care for and lend a hand to those in need. As recorded in an American Report by the Corporation for National and Community Service, veterans are 25 percent more likely to volunteer, 17 percent more likely to make a monetary donation and 30 percent more likely to participate in local organizations than civilians without military experience. At the VFW, that spirit is alive and well.

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*written by [Janie Dyhouse](#), senior editor for VFW magazine.*