

## POWER RANGERS

FPL joins 'brotherhood' of emergency workers on front lines

By GARY ROBERTS

CHARLOTTE COUNTY — Cheryl Reas came all the way from Indiana for the massive cookout. It wasn't really a choice, though, because Reas is with Storm Services, a firm contracted to help with Hurricane Irma relief efforts, and she is the cook.

On Thursday night, at the Florida Power and Light staging site near Punta Gorda Airport, she and her coworkers were making dinner for 850 emergency personnel, defying the intense heat contained within four food preparation trailers while roasting 480 pounds of pork loin.

But that is only one aspect of her duties.

"We do whatever we're asked to do. You just got to get the job done," she said.

The self-sustained city consists of semi-trailers filled with enough supplies to support FPL workers in their restoration efforts. There are trailers outfitted with 1,000 bunks for sleeping, banks of washer-dryer units for doing laundry, commercial kitchens and showers. And a dining tent with seating for 350.

On Thursday afternoon, all FPL workers were out in the field for their grueling 16-hour shift, wearing layers of heat-resistant clothing that only added to the stifling Florida temperatures. Since the base camp was established on Tuesday, they have gone through 6,000 pounds of ice and pallets of water bottles.

Sent off with a hearty breakfast and a box lunch, these men and women fight through fatigue and treacherous conditions before returning for dinner and a well-earned night's sleep.

"We have been rehearsing and planning for this so workers have the meals, places to sleep and equipment, everything they need to get the lights back on," said tour conductor Jose Labrador of FPL.

Labrador is a business account specialist during normal working hours but, like all FPL employees, he takes on a completely different task during widespread power outages. For Irma, they respond en masse to minimize recovery time, creating 30 staging sites throughout Florida.

"We have assembled an army of 21,000-plus for this unprecedented restoration effort," he said. "Every single employee has a storm-role assignment."

Due to Irma wreaking havoc statewide, FPL continues to face huge challenges. FPL expects to soon have electricity returned to the Atlantic coast, setting a Sept. 22 deadline for restoring power to Florida's West Coast.

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**Two-thirds of Charlotte outages restored**  
Florida Power & Light reported Friday afternoon that 67 percent of power outages in Charlotte County had been restored.  
As of 4 p.m., the company said 47,750 of the original 71,020 Charlotte outages caused by Hurricane Irma had been restored, leaving 23,270 customer accounts still out.  
Outages in Sarasota County had been reduced to 56,760, out of 177,580. In DeSoto, 5,270 remained, out of 14,500. In Lee, 101,090 out of 223,200.  
In all, 300,000 of the original 466,000 outages in Sarasota, Charlotte, DeSoto and Lee counties had been restored since Monday morning.  
The company cautioned that it is not uncommon for electricity to come back on, then go off briefly before coming back on again as crews repair downed lines.  
Full restoration in Southwest Florida is estimated to be achieved by Sept. 22.

Above: Duke Energy contractors coil down power lines in the aftermath of Hurricane Irma, Wednesday, in Maitland, Florida. The storm dragged down power lines and blew out transformers knocking out power to millions across Florida. AP PHOTO



In a mobile kitchen operated by contractor Storm Services, Cheryl Reas, who hails from Indiana, helps with relief efforts in the wake of Hurricane Irma. SUN PHOTO BY GARY ROBERTS

"We're expecting more crews coming to this area this weekend," he said.

Labrador emphasizes that significant improvements have already been made, with power returning to more than 70 percent of customers who lost electricity.

But it takes a thorough assessment and coordinated strategy to fire up the entire electrical grid. Outages can be caused by interruptions with transmission lines, substations or power lines. Then, "critical infrastructure" for public safety is given top priority, followed by supermarkets and gas stations that provide essential services, he said.

In Charlotte, there are pockets of customers still without electricity, with efforts focused on giving power back to the greatest number of users. Neighborhoods that don't see FPL trucks on their block should not be discouraged.

"Power is coming to you from miles away. Just because you don't see a crew, it doesn't mean that we're not working on your power," he said. "Rest assured, we do know your power is out."

And progress is being made. FPL is restoring service four times faster post-Irma than after Wilma tore through South Florida in 2005, the last major hurricane to strike the Sunshine State, he said.

However, safety remains a priority for FPL employees and customers. Workers are dealing with flooding conditions and extremely dangerous voltage — a perilous combination.

"There are so many hazards," Labrador said.

Lee Hopkins is the site manager for Storm Services, a contractor that provides FPL logistical support such as housing, food, water and sanitary facilities. Before Irma, he was assisting with the Texas flood left behind by Hurricane Harvey. His father spent 90 days in post-Katrina New Orleans.

"All storms are completely different," he said.

More than 50 Storm Services employees are located at the FPL staging ground in Charlotte, with up to 1,000 strewn across the state. They come from the Southeast U.S., and as far away as Kansas City and California, forming a "collective brotherhood" of emergency responders, Hopkins said.

"This is a very organized relief effort," he said.



*Semi-trailers filled with essential equipment and supplies are lined up off Piper Road to form a virtual city for Florida Power and Light and other emergency workers.*



*Piles of laundry are handled daily at the FPL staging site, with a veritable laundromat operating throughout the day.*



*Isaac Whitfield slices up nearly 500 pounds of pork loin for Thursday night's dinner at the FPL staging ground. Whitfield, of Indianapolis, is part of the response team from Storm Services, which was hired by FPL.*



*Lee Hopkins, site manager for contractor Storm Services, based in Southeast U.S., stands ready to help serve roughly 850 workers in the dining tent.*



*Jose Labrador of Florida Power and Light inspects the sleeping quarters for emergency workers at the FPL staging site near Punta Gorda Airport. Accommodations for 1,000 responders are located in a long line of modified semi-trailers, with 36 beds per trailer, stacked three high.*



*The dining tent boasts seating for 350 emergency workers at the FPL staging site near Punta Gorda Airport.*