

Post-hurricane partnership is rejuvenating homes, communities in Bahamas

FREEPORT, Grand Bahama (CNS) – In response to the most damaging storm in the modern history of the Bahamas, a regional office of Caritas International has moved forward in its two-year commitment to promote housing refurbishment and mental wellness in the islands.

Category 5 Hurricane Dorian – which first made landfall Sept. 1, 2019, and which stalled over the region for several days – resulted in more than 70 deaths, severe structural damage and the displacement of thousands of residents across the northern Bahamas.

Although Catholic Relief Services is not technically incorporated in the Bahamas, the U.S. bishops' international relief and development agency has set up a temporary presence under the auspices of Caritas Antilles and in cooperation with the Nassau Archdiocese.

A coordination office space has been set up at the Nassau archdiocesan chancery and with field offices in Grand Bahama, where workers have so far focused their efforts since the hurricane.

“The community in Grand Bahama has really come together in the rebuilding efforts and some of the local contractors have been engaged to do the work,” said Nassau Archbishop Patrick C. Pinder, who led a delegation of Archdiocese of Miami Catholic Charities senior staff on a post-hurricane tour of key locations Feb. 19-21.

Hurricane Dorian displaced an estimated 70,000 people throughout the Bahamas, leaving severe damage or total

destruction to more than 13,000 homes, or some 45% of all homes in Grand Bahama and Abaco.

The Caritas efforts are part of a wider hurricane recovery project that the Archdiocese of Nassau has been engaged in with its parishes, schools and communities, and with material and financial assistance from around the world – including some \$700,000 collected in South Florida parishes last year.

When the Caritas staff first arrived after the hurricane, it was difficult getting into Abaco and they had to first go to Grand Bahamas but were told they would be stuck there and have no accommodations in Abaco, according to the archbishop.

“So they used the time to understand the situation there and determined to focus their efforts there in Grand Bahama on shelter remediation, assisting people in drying out their homes with demucking and demolding, and later on they focused on setting up what they call a resilience center,” Archbishop Pinder added.

“One of the unique features of this particular hurricane, in my experience, is it was the first time you had mass evacuations out of the area and it brought the economy to a halt, and now it is just beginning to pick back up again,” he told the Florida Catholic, Miami’s archdiocesan newspaper. “In instances where you have mold, they address that first and dry the place.”

In the Hudson Estates and Freeport Ridge Estates neighborhoods of Freeport, Archbishop Pinder and his Florida delegation toured the still-developing field office for the Caritas specialists, whose work there is being funded through private donations and funds that came from national collections in U.S. parishes last year.

So far, the Caritas team has overseen a cleanup completion and minor repair and refurbishment of some 75 homes, according to Sean O’Neill, head of office for Caritas in Grand Bahamas,

along with Kesheia Morris, a projects officer for the minor repairs program.

O'Neill noted that the Bahamas project has been funded for two years and will include two community engagement offices, two social workers and a program manager at its resiliency center; with group therapy sessions including substance abuse sessions and individual counseling.

"A resiliency center is a community center that is modeling after a few that have been done in other contexts after a trauma – there was one done in Colorado after the (2012) Aurora movie theater shooting – and it does activities on a number of levels of mental health – (the) psychosocial support pyramid," O'Neill said.

"At the base level, it is a matter of doing community events just to bring people back into a space to start reconnecting with each other," he explained.

Recently, the project sponsored a movie night for adults in the Grand Bahamas and separate group activities for children. The Caritas team is planning for more community engagement and off-site events for Grand Bahamas communities that might have difficulty traveling to the resiliency center.

Housing repairs and outreach to affected families are integrated efforts, according to O'Neill.

"We have case workers engaging with families where we are doing repairs and those case workers get to check in with the social workers here when there are more serious issues they come across," he added, noting that a referral mechanism will direct more serious clients for help at Rand Memorial Hospital in Freeport.

Residents in the hard-hit eastern end of Grand Bahamas were overwhelmed by Hurricane Dorian, O'Neill said, and "we heard a deep sense of a need to rebuild community – because people

were scattered after the storm.”

“The overall sense has been that the idea is really welcomed and that comes from other organizations and from the Grand Bahamas Health Services as well,” he said.

In addition, Caritas plans to start exploring mental health and counseling projects in Abaco, which suffered the brunt of Hurricane Dorian’s strongest winds and storm surge.

Eulie Bastian Elliott, director of the Office of Family Life and newly appointed Hurricane Dorian relief and response specialist for the Archdiocese of Nassau, said the workload for the archdiocesan staff in the Bahamas has doubled since Dorian.

It has resulted in the development of a revised and more complete archdiocesan hurricane response plan for the future so that every parish, school and church staff person knows exactly what to do before, during and after a storm.

“There has been so much work to do since September and the rest is history because we had to get on the ground right away, said Elliott, who retired after 37 years working for the Bahamian government as a CPA before coming to work for the church in the Bahamas.

“Grand Bahamas is in cleanup mode, and we are grateful for the response we got from other countries and thanks to that we were able to bounce back,” she said.

“We just hope and pray we don’t get hit again this next hurricane season, and I must give Archbishop Pinder credit and kudos for taking on this mammoth effort to bring hope, help and relief to our people again,” Elliott told the Florida Catholic. “As a shepherd, that is what he is called to do and a lot of people are looking to him for leadership. He has spent long hours doing just that.”