

Close **Orlando Edition**

Catholic agencies continue to aid victims of tornados

DELAND — A 42-foot van with mobile kitchen rolled into town to help feed the survivors of the Feb. 2 tornados. Help Our People Eat, or HOPE, is an emergency-response vehicle owned by the Society of St. Vincent de Paul and operated under statements of understanding with the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the American Red Cross and other disaster-relief and mass-care agencies.



PHOTO COURTESY OF ST. VINCENT DE PAUL

The van, equipped with a full stainless steel kitchen — grill, soup-preparation stations, sinks, dishwashers and food-service windows — parked at 2744 Botts Landing Road and was expected to remain there for at least two weeks. (It would stay as long as needed, until it was needed more elsewhere, officials said.) Volunteers operate the van from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. daily, offering sustenance to both survivors and volunteers assisting in recovery and cleanup of the devastated areas.

The HOPE van, an emergency-response vehicle, is a fully operating kitchen, able to offer meals to thousands each day from a parking spot at 2744 Botts Landing Road in DeLand.

“Our hearts go out to the Floridians left homeless by the recent tornados,” said Joe Flannigan, St. Vincent de Paul’s national president. “We want them to know that we’re praying for them and that our members in Florida and across the country are ready to help in any way we can. In the meantime, maybe HOPE can help lighten their present burden.”

Operating on its own generator and carrying a full complement of mass-care items, HOPE can feed up to 10,000 people per day. It can also act as a distribution center for essential personal care needs, such as toothbrushes and shaving kits. The local council expects to serve up to 3,000 meals a day.

“We recognize the tremendous loss the people in this area have suffered and we hope we can bring some measure of peace and security back into their lives,” said Bruce Stumbras, president of the Diocese of Orlando Council of St. Vincent de Paul.

Local Vincentians (St. Vincent de Paul volunteers) seek donations of appliances and furniture to help those who need to rebuild. “We are going to be here for a long time,” Stumbras said.

Tornado victims also received aid from Catholic Charities of Central Florida Inc. Allan Rettig, regional director for the organizations's Orlando office, made a simple phone call to St. Peter Parish in DeLand Feb. 2, shortly after a tornado had swept through a part of that city.

"Let us know what's needed," said Rettig.

St. Peter Parish created a temporary collection center and asked Catholic Charities to send the first truck Feb 5. The truck was filled with Meals Ready to Eat (MREs), 300 pillows and blankets, cleanup kits of 5-gallon buckets filled with scrub brush and soap products, and personal care items. A truck that arrived Feb. 7 contained more of the same.

Rettig called Florida Interfaith Networking in Disaster, a faith-based organization formed in 1994, to ascertain if there were others in need. FIND includes local, state and national recovery groups. Rettig learned of a low-income community in DeLand where eight to 10 families had lost their homes and were in need of assistance.

Local clergy member, the Rev. Don Johnson of God's Manor Ministries, was referred to St. Peter Parish for help.

"St. Peter's Catholic center was very helpful to the community and they met everyone's needs that we sent. I want to really thank God for Alan (Rettig). We would never have been able to meet the needs if it hadn't been for their support," Rev. Johnson said.

Rettig said, "God has given to us and God has moved us to give generously to those who are hurting. There has been great good that has come from this disaster."

Tanya Goodman of the Florida Catholic staff and Laura Dodson, correspondent, contributed to this article.

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