



CASE STUDY

**Healthcare Network
Has Weathered
the Storms**

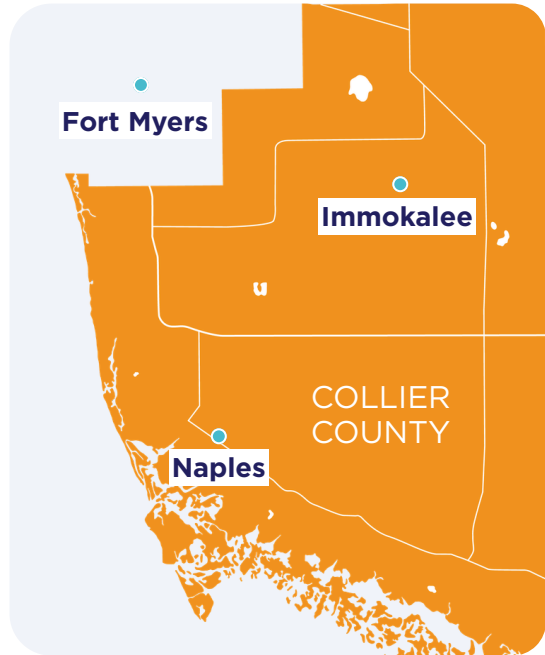
INTRODUCTION





Healthcare Network operates 15 sites serving approximately 54,000 patients across Collier County, Florida. The region is predominantly agricultural, particularly known for tomato production, while also encompassing several high-income communities. It spans the beachfront condominiums of Naples on Florida’s west coast to large inland areas of preserved swampland and forest, which are home to diverse wildlife, including alligators, black bears, and Florida panthers.

In southwest Florida, hurricanes are a recurring and inevitable risk. In September 2017, after causing widespread devastation in the Caribbean and the Florida Keys, Hurricane Irma made landfall in Collier County as a Category 3 storm. Irma left approximately 7.5 million homes, nearly 70 percent of the state, without power for days and resulted in 92 deaths and at least \$50 billion in damage across the mainland United States.

Healthcare Network experienced widespread power outages that forced the closure of all sites for two full weeks. The resulting financial and operational challenges highlighted critical lessons related to facilities management and staffing—lessons that would help mitigate the impact of Hurricane Ian five years later.

In September 2022, Hurricane Ian made landfall near Fort Myers, roughly 40 miles north of Collier County, as a Category 4 storm. Ian caused 156 deaths and an estimated \$112 billion in damage, making it the third-costliest hurricane in U.S. history. While Healthcare Network avoided major structural damage, the surrounding community experienced significant power outages and flooding. In response, Healthcare Network mobilized to provide critical services, including a tetanus vaccination campaign.



-  **14 sites**
-  **54,000 patients**
-  **Collier County, FL**
-  **Coastal + agricultural service area**

BEFORE THE STORM

Storm Preparedness: How Healthcare Network Communicates & Decides



Communication

Communicate early and often, and plan staffing before and after the storm

Healthcare Network Chief Operating Officer John “Trey” Fletcher emphasizes the importance of proactive and frequent communication with staff. As soon as there is a possibility that a storm could impact Florida—including even early indications of storm activity in the Gulf of Mexico—the organization begins communicating with staff to acknowledge the situation and confirm that leadership is monitoring developments.



Fletcher stresses the need for clarity around how and when decisions will be made regarding site closures. While Healthcare Network previously aligned closures with local public school decisions, it now makes independent determinations. Mandatory evacuations still trigger automatic closures, but otherwise the goal is to maintain services for the community whenever it is safe to do so.

For emergency notifications, Healthcare Network relies on straightforward communication methods. The organization formerly used a mass text messaging service, but discontinued it due to cost and limited use. Now the organization uses email and a telephone call chain post-disaster, which Fletcher notes has proven equally, if not more, effective than automated systems that depend on regularly updated contact information.

Prior to a storm, leadership identifies which staff plan to remain in the area and which intend to evacuate. This includes confirming availability across clinical, operational, and leadership teams. After the storm passes, a second check-in is conducted, as circumstances may change. Late evacuation decisions can affect staffing levels during the critical reopening period.

Disaster Planning

Simplify emergency plans into clear, usable guidance

The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services require Health Centers* to maintain an emergency management plan; however, Fletcher notes that a shortened document may be helpful during an actual crisis.

To address this challenge, Healthcare Network relies on concise, targeted communications during emergencies. Leadership pre-identifies primary and backup staff responsible for communication and distributes brief, action-oriented messages that clearly outline expectations and next steps.



Fair Policies for Staff

Establish clear emergency pay policies to protect staff and organizational sustainability

Following Irma, Healthcare Network implemented a formal emergency pay policy that budgets for three paid “hurricane days” annually. When closures extend beyond that period, staff may be reassigned to open sites when possible. This policy balances employee support with financial sustainability during extended disruptions.

Transparency is central to the policy’s success. Staff can clearly see available emergency leave in their time-off statements and understand what to expect when a storm occurs.



**For the purposes of this publication, “Health Centers” refers to Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA)-supported participants in the Health Center Program.*

Documentation

Document assets and revenue in advance to support insurance and business interruption claims

Fletcher strongly recommends documenting facilities and equipment before a storm. Photographs and inventories of assets at each site can be essential when filing insurance claims. In addition, documenting site-specific revenue is critical for substantiating business interruption claims, as insurers require detailed financial records before issuing payouts.

Protecting Assets

Take practical measures to protect critical systems without overcomplicating preparations

Healthcare Network uses standard mitigation strategies, such as deploying sandbags and securing facilities, when storms are anticipated. Fletcher cautions against overly aggressive measures that may inadvertently cause damage, particularly when staff are rushed and under stress.

One critical priority is payroll continuity. Fletcher advises ensuring payroll systems are cloud-based and that payroll staff are relocated out of the storm’s impact area if possible. This ensures staff can be paid on time regardless of local conditions. Following major storms, Healthcare Network tries to accelerate payroll to help employees manage personal financial disruptions.

Mobile health units are another priority. Healthcare Network’s units are fueled, strategically positioned based on storm trajectory, and distributed across multiple inland locations to reduce the risk of total loss.

✔ Protect What Matters Most Before the Storm



Do the Basics

Secure facilities using standard storm protocols



Avoid Over- Handling Equipment

Rushed handling increases risk of damage



Protect Mission Critical Assets

Payroll programs hosted in the cloud



Support Staff Financial Stability

Ensure cash flow when personal losses may be high



Secure Mobile Health Units

Secure, fuel, and distribute mobile units

THE IMMEDIATE AFTERMATH

Immediate Post-Storm Site Assessment



Backup Power for Essentials

Maintain reliable backup power to protect medications and vaccines

Hurricane Irma exposed Healthcare Network’s vulnerability to prolonged power outages. With all sites closed for two weeks, the organization experienced significant losses—particularly spoiled vaccines and medications due to lack of refrigeration. Since then, backup generators have been installed for most pharmaceutical storage areas, along with service contracts to ensure proper maintenance.

The organization is also piloting battery backup systems that can maintain refrigeration for at least 24 hours, allowing time to relocate supplies if needed. In addition, a grant from Direct Relief is supporting the installation of a solar-powered backup system at one site.

Surveying and Documenting Facilities

Assess and document each site safely after a storm

Once conditions are safe, designated teams assess each facility for security issues and damage, including water intrusion, broken windows, or roof damage. Thorough documentation supports insurance claims and informs leadership decisions about which sites can reopen.

Fletcher emphasizes that staff conducting assessments must be trained to recognize hazards, including electrical risks and flood conditions, and equipped with appropriate protective gear.

Caring for the Community and Staff

Reopen key sites quickly to provide essential services and support recovery

Healthcare Network prioritizes reopening at least one or two strategically located sites as soon as possible. Even when patient volume is initially low, it's beneficial to distribute water, provide charging and internet access, and offer a safe, air conditioned space for community members.

It's equally important to support staff well-being. Access to showers and basic amenities helps employees manage personal challenges and maintain morale during recovery efforts.

THE RECOVERY PROCESS

You Can't Prevent Every Emergency—But You Can Reduce the Impact



Communicating with State and Community Leaders

Share operational updates promptly to guide patient care and reduce emergency department strain

Following a disaster, Healthcare Network shares operational status updates with its state Primary Care Association and HRSA. The organization also maintains close communication with local government and community leaders to help direct patients to appropriate care settings and reduce unnecessary emergency department utilization.



Accessing Recovery Funds

Engage nonprofit partners quickly to secure recovery funding and resources



Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) often play a critical role in post-disaster recovery. Fletcher recommends having grant-writing capacity or an executive team prepared to engage quickly with NGOs to align recovery funding with organizational needs.

Healthcare Network has partnered with organizations such as Direct Relief, International Medical Corps, and Heart to Heart International. These partnerships have supported temporary clinical facilities, mobile units, and other innovative solutions when permanent sites were unavailable.

Speed is essential. Fletcher notes that recovery funding opportunities diminish significantly as time passes, even though community needs may persist.

Preparing for the Next Storm

Identify vulnerabilities and invest in protections for critical assets

Experience has reinforced that disasters are inevitable, whether from hurricanes or other unexpected events. By identifying vulnerabilities, distributing risk, and prioritizing protections for high-value assets, such as generators, mobile units, and communications systems, Healthcare Network has reduced the likelihood of catastrophic loss.

While progress has been made, additional improvement goals remain, including expanded satellite connectivity, broader generator coverage, and continued facility upgrades to exceed building code requirements.



LESSONS LEARNED



Through multiple major storms, Healthcare Network has developed a strong response framework. The organization’s leadership and staff are better prepared, more confident, and more coordinated when disasters occur.

Reflecting on Hurricane Irma, Fletcher emphasizes the value of shared experience and peer learning. By documenting and sharing these lessons, Healthcare Network hopes to help other Health Centers strengthen their preparedness and avoid similar challenges in future disasters.

DISASTER PREPAREDNESS AND RECOVERY STEPS

Before the Storm

- Communicate Early and Often
- Simplify Emergency Plans
- Establish Fair Policies for Staff
- Document Assets and Revenue
- Protect Your Assets

Immediate Aftermath

- Maintain Backup Power for the Essentials
- Survey and Document
- Care for Your Community and Staff

The Recovery Process

- Communicate with State and Community Leaders
- Access Recovery Funds
- Prepare for the Next Storm

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