Disasters mount, and South Jersey volunteers step up to help

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As the number of disasters — natural and manmade — accumulate across the nation, donations are being sought from businesses and residents day in and day out to help the hundreds of thousands of victims.

Some might think this has led to donor fatigue, but locals have jumped in to help. However, organizations admit the amount of donations and volunteers have not been as abundant as when Harvey first struck Texas in late August. Volunteer coordinators say it could be the numerous organizations that have put out the call for help are diluting the response.

“People are always gung-ho at the start, but now it’s been how long since Harvey hit? How long since Puerto Rico?” said volunteer coordinator Nicole Troast at Good Shepherd United Methodist Church in Northfield. “It’s also less because more people are having fundraisers.”

Three hurricanes in one month — Harvey in Texas, Irma in Florida and the Caribbean, and Maria in Puerto Rico and elsewhere — were followed by a mass shooting during a Las Vegas country music festival on Oct. 8. And now, more than 15 wildfires are raging through California.

After Hurricane Harvey, volunteers from Good Shepherd began receiving supplies for recovery efforts as a donation hub for the United Methodist Committee on Relief, or UMCOR, which provides disaster relief efforts worldwide and year-round.

Troast said the giving hasn’t stopped, it’s just not as intense as at first. She said that storm response is particularly important in the Jersey Shore region, which knows all-too-well from Hurricane Sandy in 2012 the impact from a devastating storm.

Diane Concannon, spokeswoman for the American Red Cross New Jersey Region, said four vehicles and 140 volunteers from New Jersey have been deployed to almost every disaster area in the last seven weeks, except Las Vegas.

“We saw an outpouring of support for Hurricane Harvey,” Concannon said. “As of Oct. 9, the (national) American Red Cross has authorized payment to more than 477,000 households severely affected by Hurricane Harvey. That’s more than a $190 million in direct financial assistance.”

Concannon said that after Irma, the giving continued but not at the same level as after Harvey. For Maria, she said, it is too early to judge the response.

“We have seen a lot of separate fundraisers step up, and the numbers aren’t in,” she said.

Concannon said people always step forward to help when devastation hits, but the number of disasters and efforts can distort the response. She said that because the Red Cross honors specific designations on donations
— for example, “Hurricane Harvey relief” — she encouraged donors to designate a more general “disaster relief.”

“That helps with all disasters big and small across the country,” Concannon said.

This weekend, Ventnor Coffee owner Michael Einwechter will host a benefit concert at his coffee shop, with proceeds benefiting United For Puerto Rico.

“One of my best friends, her family lost their house in Puerto Rico, so I spent many hours on the phone with her the night after she had heard from them,” said Einwechter, president of the community group Amazing Ventnor.

Einwechter said he sees the support from his community as friends are traveling to Florida and Texas to help. He said numerous businesses have stepped up to help and is expecting 3,000 attendees for his Puerto Rico fundraiser.

“We have a huge Hispanic community down here in South Jersey, so through social media, through press and through TV, we’ve been fortunate that we’re reaching these people. We’re getting phone calls and emails, local businesses reaching out and trying to help. It’s been very overwhelming and very humbling,” Einwechter said.

He said only three businesses he approached were not able to give donations.

“Everything’s been donated. It’s just amazing, down to the toilets,” Einwechter said.

In September, volunteer Debra LoFranco, 33, of Brigantine, went to Houston for the American Red Cross on her first out-of-state deployment, she said.

“I saw that there was a need and had the opportunity. It was great that I met people from all over (the country and abroad),” she said. “It was amazing to see all the people that responded.”

LoFranco said she wishes she could take more time to go to California or Puerto Rico, but her work schedule doesn’t allow it.

Mark and Sue Newcomb, of Galloway Township, were leaving supplies Thursday at The Press of Atlantic City’s donation drop-off point for Puerto Rico — a joint effort with the Puerto Rican Civic Association of Hammonton — and said all the devastation has made them more inclined to give.

“It’s horrible. I feel for them,” said Sue Newcomb. “I don’t think we’ve seen something like this in a long time.”