



Emergency Preparedness in Long Term Care

Proactive Strategies & Lessons
Learned from the 2024 Hurricane Season



Introduction

Maintaining the gold standard in long term care goes beyond day-to-day care. It requires ensuring the safety and well-being of residents and staff when hurricanes and other disasters strike. Florida's nursing centers and assisted living facilities have a unique responsibility to safeguard some of the state's most vulnerable residents — maximizing safety, efficiency, and continuity of care under extraordinary conditions.

In 2024, Florida endured three major hurricanes that put this responsibility to the test. Centers across the state activated emergency plans and made critical, time-sensitive decisions using the most comprehensive information available. These experiences showcased the resilience of long term care providers and the strengths of Florida's emergency response system, while also highlighting where policies, coordination, and more consistent protocols can further enhance care — whether in the sunshine or in the eye of the storm.



The Florida Health Care Association (FHCA) supports its members year-round by sharing training, resources, and best practices that foster preparedness. FHCA plays a critical role in identifying challenges, amplifying provider needs, and promoting coordination across stakeholders.

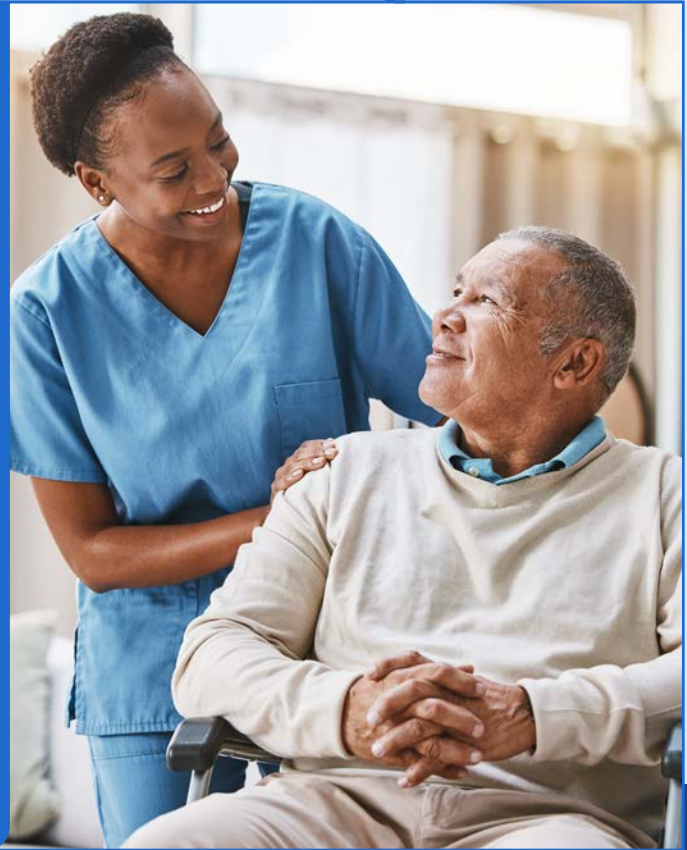
This report highlights FHCA and its members' proactive preparedness efforts, lessons from the 2024 hurricane season, and opportunities to strengthen Florida's emergency response framework so that residents and staff remain safe and supported, and Florida's frail elders and people with disabilities residing in our long term care centers are cared for before, during, and after any storm.

Proactively Preparing Year-Round

EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS BEGINS LONG BEFORE A STORM.

FHCA works year-round to help members maintain a culture of readiness and resilience, so Florida's long term care centers can **expect the unexpected** and respond quickly when challenges arise.

Florida's hurricane season is notoriously active. That's why **continuous, proactive preparation** — well before an emergency ever occurs — is essential. Centers that engage in **year-round planning, training, and collaboration** are better equipped to protect residents, staff, and communities when disaster strikes.



Central to this ongoing work is **partnership**. FHCA member centers collaborate with state regulators, local emergency managers and utility providers, and other stakeholders to:



Develop tailored, comprehensive emergency management plans.



Conduct ongoing staff training and regular drills.



Build the adaptability needed to respond swiftly as conditions change.

Emergency Plans & Training

COMPREHENSIVE EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT PLANS (CEMPs)

Florida's skilled nursing centers and assisted living facilities are required by the **Florida Agency for Health Care Administration (AHCA)** to annually update their **Comprehensive Emergency Management Plans (CEMPs)**. These plans, created in close collaboration with emergency managers, outline clear procedures, roles, and responsibilities **before, during, and after emergencies**.

CEMPs cover a wide range of scenarios, including:



NATURAL DISASTERS

HURRICANES • TORNADOES • FLOODS • FIRES



FACILITY-SPECIFIC EMERGENCIES

POWER OUTAGES • HAZARDOUS MATERIALS • SECURITY INCIDENTS

TRAINING & IMPLEMENTATION

Centers bring these plans to life through continuous training, including:

- **Drills & tabletop exercises** with local emergency officials and health care coalitions.
- **Staff exercises** to test backup power systems and reinforce response protocols.
- **Shelter-in-place and evacuation practice runs**, analyzing the effectiveness of procedures.
- **Emergency role simulations** during non-emergency times to build confidence and readiness.
- **Trauma-informed care demonstrations** to safeguard residents' well-being during emergency scenarios.

New employees also undergo **comprehensive training upon hire** so staff members are prepared to respond effectively in a crisis.



Collaboration With State Regulatory Agencies & Local Emergency Managers

Strong collaboration is at the heart of Florida's preparedness system.

STORM COMMUNICATIONS AND COLLABORATION

Before, during and after a storm, FHCA hosts daily coordination calls with AHCA, the state Division of Emergency Management, utility providers, and other partners to ensure long term care centers are informed and equipped with the necessary resources and support for emergency preparedness, response, and recovery.

POLICY ENGAGEMENT

FHCA coordinates with state lawmakers to refine regulations that balance resident safety with operational realities.



Infrastructure & Resource Planning

Proactivity ensures infrastructure and resources can withstand emergencies.

GENERATOR READINESS

Centers conduct regular generator checks, confirm full fuel tanks, and arrange resupply contracts so power and safe indoor temperatures can be maintained for **7–10 days**.

POWER RESTORATION

Utility providers have a greater understanding of long term care resident vulnerabilities and are partnering with providers to support rapid power presentation. Centers' account and meter numbers are also logged into AHCA's Health Facility Reporting System to help expedite power restoration after outages.

STOCKPILING ESSENTIALS

Staff maintain reserves of non-perishable food, clean water, medications, and emergency supplies to sustain residents and staff during extended outages or shelter-in-place scenarios.

Mapping Out Proactive Storm Preparedness & Response

PROTECTING FLORIDA'S MOST VULNERABLE

Providing quality care for Florida's seniors includes ensuring that their safety and well-being remain a priority during hurricanes and other natural disasters. Florida Health Care Association member centers follow strict hurricane preparedness protocols to keep residents safe before, during, and after a storm.



Transfer Trauma: Why Emergency Decisions Matter

During an emergency, evacuation is sometimes necessary to protect life, but the risks must be carefully weighed when developing evacuation and relocation plans. For long term care residents, leaving a familiar environment can cause transfer trauma — the psychological, emotional, and physical stress that accompanies relocation during an emergency.

Studies have found a far greater likelihood of adverse effects on long term care residents who undergo a transfer, especially those with dementia and other memory deficiencies.

TRANSFER TRAUMA ENCOMPASSES:

- **Health Risks:** Increased likelihood of pressure injuries, weight loss, dehydration, and medical complications if residents must be relocated.
- **Emotional Toll:** Disruption from familiar surroundings, potentially heightening anxiety, disorientation, and cognitive decline.
- **Caregiver Strain:** High need for trauma-informed care under intense logistical and regulatory pressure.

These realities underscore the need for collaborative, evidence-based evacuation decisions — made by facility leaders in consultation with local emergency managers and state officials — to balance storm risk against the risks of relocation.

Federal regulations require skilled nursing centers to maintain systems for **trauma-informed care delivery**, ensuring staff are trained to identify and support residents who may experience trauma during a crisis.

Transfer trauma research is sourced from: "Health Effects of the Relocation of Patients With Dementia: A Scoping Review to Inform Medical and Policy Decision-Making," Frida V. M. Ryman, et al., Gerontologist, 2019, 59:6, e674-e682; and "Psychological interventions designed to reduce relocation stress for older people transitioning into permanent residential aged care: a systematic scoping review," Shanna Fealy, et al., Aging & Mental Health, 28:9, 1197-1208

Sheltering-in-Place for Long Term Care Centers

During weather emergencies, nursing centers and assisted living facilities work with their local and county emergency management offices on decisions to ensure the health and well-being of residents and staff during emergencies. When sheltering in place is the safest option for overall well-being, long term care centers are prepared. Centers coordinate with state and local emergency managers to keep residents safe, families informed, and emergency supplies stocked.

Florida law requires nursing centers and assisted living facilities to be equipped with emergency backup power systems to keep critical safety equipment running and ensure safe indoor temperatures during outages. Centers must also maintain stockpiles of food, water, medications, and other essentials to safeguard residents' health and well-being throughout an emergency.

SHELTERING-IN-PLACE PLANNING AND PREPARATION INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING:

- **Full-time Staffing:** Provisions for continuous 24-hour staffing through the entirety of the emergency.
- **Essential Supplies:** Detailed plans to ensure there is an abundance of food, water, medication, and other essential supplies.
- **Infrastructure Reinforcements:** Reinforcing areas of the center and ensuring residents will be safe inside.
- **Energy:** Reliable steps to provide emergency generator power and restore power, so residents and staff always have access to cool temperatures and energy-based services.



Evacuating a Long Term Care Center

When evacuation is the safest choice, every detail must be planned with care. Centers activate their **Comprehensive Evacuation Plans (CEPs)** from CEMPs — coordinating with local authorities, preparing equipment, and supporting medical readiness to continue quality care every step of the way.

Florida's long term care centers are required by state law to have a comprehensive plan that includes preparations for evacuations. Those plans include coordinating with local authorities, preparing equipment, and ensuring medical preparedness, including packing "go bags" with essential supplies and medical records.

COMPREHENSIVE EVACUATION PLANS INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING:

- **Decision-making:** Outline of the team's decision-making structure in emergency scenarios, including identification of the individual charged with implementing evacuation procedures.
- **Timeliness:** Detailed steps to complete all necessary movement before the arrival of tropical storm winds.
- **Transportation:** Available transportation options through mutual aid agreements, accompanying arrangements to move logistical support (records, medications, food, water, and other necessities), a list of pre-determined evacuation destinations, and multiple evacuation routes in case of hazards.
- **Evacuation Locations:** Safe and compliant evacuation destinations with the accompanying staffing and a plan for how to care for residents before, during, and after the evacuation.
- **Communication:** Procedures for notifying the families of residents that their center is being evacuated.
- **Trauma-informed care:** Ensuring no resident is left alone throughout an evacuation, with professionals actively assisting residents' care needs.

Anatomy of an Evacuation

BEFORE EVACUATION	DURING EVACUATION	AFTER EVACUATION
When a storm is on the horizon, centers begin timely collaboration and communication with emergency managers.	Centers coordinate with local Emergency Managers and officials, adhering to the established evacuation plan and procedures.	After the storm has passed, center leaders work with local officials to confirm the building is structurally sound and safe to reenter.
Centers must determine if an evacuation is the safest option and necessary based on the most up-to-date information and data.	Centers must determine the optimal timeline for an evacuation to ensure the safe transport of residents, their belongings, and essential supplies. This means evacuating before the storm gets too close, but waiting until after it is clear to ensure the storm will not change course toward the chosen evacuation route.	Proactive planning in CEPs identifies how centers approach reentry operations, including the gathering of accurate and timely data to assist this process.
Year-round proactive preparation and Comprehensive Evacuation Plans (CEPs) serve as guidance for: • Decision-making • Determining the safest evacuation placements • Communication with residents' family members • Transportation of residents, their belongings, and necessities like food, water, medications, and records	Centers train to provide trauma-informed care during emergencies. Long term caregivers remain with the residents for the entirety of the evacuation process.	When the center reentry is safe, residents are transported back to their home center with active support from dedicated caregivers.
Centers must prepare enough food, water, medications, and supplies for at least a 72-hour stay at the evacuation destination, with provisions on hand to last as long as necessary, depending on the severity of the storm.	When residents and the accompanying staff arrive at their safe evacuation placement, all hands are on deck to ensure they remain comfortable and supported, minimizing the risks of transfer trauma	

Working Together to Strengthen Care

Throughout June 2025, FHCA convened three statewide hurricane roundtables with the Agency for Health Care Administration, Department of Health, Division of Emergency Management, local emergency managers, utility providers and member centers to foster open dialogue and identify meaningful solutions.

DISCUSSIONS HIGHLIGHTED:

1. **Policies and procedures that support quality care during emergencies,**
2. **Shared lessons from recent storms,**
3. **Opportunities to strengthen communications and collaboration, and**
4. **Steps to continue streamlining preparedness and operations in the future.**



What's Working Well

Even amid challenges, proactive planning and collaboration have delivered meaningful results. Lessons from recent storms show how strong partnerships between providers, emergency managers, and state leaders make Florida's long term care system more resilient and responsive.

- **Consistent Communication:** Daily pre- and post-storm status calls hosted by FHCA and in coordination with AHCA keep providers informed, allow for rapid problem-solving, and give state officials clear, direct insights into on-the-ground needs.
- **Innovative Evacuation Strategies:** Providers develop creative approaches to reduce risk during relocations, such as scheduling night-time moves to avoid dangerous heat exposure and roadway congestion. These practices help minimize stress for residents while streamlining transfers.
- **Strong Utility Coordination:** Strong partnerships with utility partners that have an understanding of the medical complexities of long term care residents have led to the prioritization of power restoration for nursing centers and assisted-living communities.
- **Status Reporting Pre- and Post-Storm:** The statewide use of the AHCA Health Facility Reporting System (HFRS) to report evacuations or sheltering in place, bed availability, storm damage or power outages in real time helps AHCA and emergency management partners support critical needs. In the event of power outages, information included in the system, including account and meter numbers, assists utility companies as they are prioritizing restoration more quickly and effectively. As a result, downtime for critical power systems can be reduced.

Lessons From the 2024 Hurricane Season

During Hurricanes Helene and Milton, providers encountered intensified challenges that underscored the complexity of emergency decision-making for long term care centers:

- **Conflicting Directives:** State websites and county Emergency Operations Centers (EOCs) sometimes posted inconsistent flood and evacuation zones, creating confusion and uncertainty for providers. And in some cases, centers were ordered to evacuate even when surrounding properties were not included in the evacuation orders which led to confusion.
- **Last-Minute Orders:** Evacuation directives delivered with little notice placed significant strain on transportation resources and available placement options for residents.
- **Limited Local Support:** During the large-scale emergencies presented by Helene and Milton, resources for evacuation assistance in some areas were stretched thin, adding another layer of difficulty in executing safe resident transfers.

These experiences revealed the urgent need for clearer communication and better alignment between state, county, and facility-level decision-making.

Key Challenges Identified by Providers

EVACUATION PLANS

- Mutual aid agreements can break down during leadership turnover or when vendors are overbooked.
- High occupancy rates and square footage requirements in the Emergency Power Plan Rules limit relocation options, especially for independent centers without sister centers that are not part of a multi-facility organization.
- Traffic congestion – especially in highly populated counties – and short-notice evacuation orders can lead to timing challenges.
- Early or unnecessary evacuations can heighten the risk of transfer trauma for residents.
- Confusion among county emergency managers under the impression that long term care centers can only evacuate to similar health care centers rather than a site that is safe, offers the appropriate cooling, equipment, and space to accommodate evacuees.

COORDINATION & COMMUNICATION

- Conflicting flood zone maps and directives between state and county agencies create confusion. Insurance companies can further complicate this issue – If a provider evacuates before an official order is called, damages may not be covered by insurance.
- Inconsistent or outdated mobile contact information for emergency managers hampers real-time communication.
- Facility ownership changes can lead to communication gaps with local officials.
- Limited cross-training between emergency managers, county leaders, and providers creates misunderstandings about the unique needs of skilled nursing centers versus assisted living facilities.
- Medicare waivers between hospitals and long term care centers allow care to continue when residents are displaced, but create unique challenges. The 3-day stay waiver is often sufficient if issued timely, but Medicare Advantage and some private insurers are not subject to waivers – creating coverage gaps in emergencies.

UTILITIES & POWER RESTORATION

- Unclear process for notifying utilities when center emergency cooling plans require the use of cooling zones, which could delay power restoration.
- Lack of defined escalation procedures leaves providers making repeated calls to utility companies during outages.

POST-STORM RECOVERY

- Re-entry can often be delayed due to layered safety checks by local and state officials, which can put a strain on staff who have been working extended shifts without the ability to check on their own personal challenges brought on by storms.
- Staffing is also strained when fuel shortages, blocked supply chains, or disruptions to medical infrastructure (e.g., dialysis centers) limit essential worker availability.

Recommendations & Best Practices

FACILITY-LEVEL RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Establish clear trigger points for activating emergency plans**, and ensure every staff member is trained on the CEMP, including shift assignments during emergencies, evacuation procedures and step-by-step actions at each stage.
- **Reconfirm receiving facility and transportation agreements** in advance to avoid overpromised services.
- **Document and share flood-prone areas of the property** with local emergency managers. If large puddles are left on the property after it rains that are slow to recede, take pictures and share with local emergency management.
- **Enhance on-site, hands-on collaboration** through storm modeling exercises with county emergency managers to build stronger relationships and improve mutual understanding of center operations. These proactive efforts give emergency managers firsthand knowledge of resident needs and center layouts before an emergency strikes.
- **Improve communication lines** and ensure multiple county emergency manager contacts are included when planning cross-county evacuations, and update mobile phone contacts for center leadership in HFRS.
- **Adopt cybersecurity safeguards** (e.g., multi-factor authentication, phishing tests).
- **Proactively identify potential overflow** or backup evacuation sites capable of hosting up to 240 residents across two centers per county for scenarios when primary evacuation locations fail to work for various reasons.
- **Ensure stronger communication immediately after storms** to coordinate the safest and quickest possible re-entry for residents and staff.

EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Strengthen coordination with providers** by participating in more collaborative training with long term care centers. FHCA's 16 districts should consider hosting meetings that convene all levels of emergency agencies and center leadership to review emergency systems and response protocols.
- **Providers should proactively make connections with emergency managers** during blue-sky opportunities.
- **Providing storm-lead contact information to center leaders**, including mobile phone numbers, can help with stronger communication during emergencies.
- **Improve decision-making** by conducting more site visits and storm modeling tours with centers to ensure evacuation zones reflect the specific conditions and hardening of each center, not just broad geographic zones.
- **Provide a clear process** for centers to request reviews or corrections to flood zone designations before plans are approved.
- **Increase the number of evacuation sites** appropriate for long term care residents by allowing the use of appropriately equipped non-health care facilities when necessary, which is authorized under current regulation.

Recommendations & Best Practices

REGULATORY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **AHCA's Health Facility Reporting System has been identified as an important, real-time tool to help gather data about centers' status, both before and after a storm.** It's critical that long term care centers continue recognizing the importance of maintaining updated center leadership contact information, back up reporting contacts, and the required data to identify bed availability as well as any critical needs.
- **It was suggested that utility account and meter numbers** be included in both the Health Facility Reporting System (HFRS) and centers' internal records to assist utility providers with expedited power restoration.
- **Suspend routine, non-storm-related inspections** (e.g., pharmacy reviews, Ombudsman visits) 96 hours before projected landfall to allow centers to focus on storm preparation.

Strengthening Care Through Collaboration and Communication

On the front lines of disaster preparedness, Florida's long term care centers achieve success through coordination. Centers bring firsthand knowledge of resident needs, lawmakers provide resources and regulatory clarity, and emergency managers supply directives and data. Utility providers, health care coalitions, and state officials all play critical roles in keeping systems running.

The 2024 hurricane season showed both the resilience of Florida's providers and the best paths to continue aligning safety procedures with agencies. By strengthening collaboration and communication, advancing evacuation protocols, and incorporating long term care expertise into local decision-making, Florida can maintain its status as the gold standard in keeping long term care residents and staff safe, supported, and cared for — before, during, and after any emergency.



Florida Health Care Association represents 88% of Florida's nursing centers. FHCA membership also includes other long term care facilities that provide post-acute and sub-acute care, short-term rehab, assisted living, and other services to the elderly and individuals with disabilities in Florida. The mission of FHCA is to advance the quality of services, image, professional development, and financial stability of its members. As Florida's first and largest advocacy organization for long term care providers and the elderly they serve, the Association has worked diligently since 1954 to assist its members with continuously improving quality of care and quality of life for the state's growing elder care population.

For more information about the Florida Health Care Association, visit www.fhca.org.

To learn more about long term care hurricane preparedness and response, visit fhcahurricaneprep.org.



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