

Floridians line up for food assistance in the aftermath of Hurricane Irma

By Matthew Taylor
17 October 2017

Hurricane Irma had a devastating impact throughout the Southeast United States, but hit particularly hard in Florida, where it first made landfall. Wind speeds in the state reached up to 142 miles per hour and rainfall levels ranged from 6 to 16 inches. Storm surges reached up to eight feet in the northern part of the state, a record level.

Fifteen million residents lost electricity, many for a week or more. Flooding damaged or destroyed thousands of residences and businesses. Millions of residents were unable to earn money in the aftermath of the storm because their workplaces were destroyed, or because they had to provide childcare when many of the state's schools were closed due to damage.

Throughout the state, hundreds of thousands of residents affected by Hurricane Irma have lined up at parks, convention centers and parking lots across the state over the course of the last week to receive vouchers for emergency food assistance.

The events are all-day affairs, beginning in the morning and lasting into the night, with residents standing in line for eight hours or more to receive two months' worth of Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, commonly known as food stamps.

In Broward county, on Sunday a planned giveaway had to be canceled after fights broke out and multiple residents fainted from standing in line in the sweltering heat. In Miami-Dade County on Saturday, police shut down the event after chaos broke out among the desperate applicants. "They went in trampling over old ladies, people with kids. It was horrible," a local resident told the *Miami Herald*.

Many other applicants also spoke to the media about their experiences trying to apply for benefits. Beverly Moore of North Lauderdale told the *Sun Sentinel*, "I

feel like I'm in a third world country right now, not in America trying to get assistance. I mean, there are old people here who haven't had water in hours."

In Hialeah, according to another resident, "everybody went crazy and ran in all directions, I even saw a lady in a wheelchair get trampled, but today everybody is polite and friendly."

Another Miami resident, Enrique, told the *Herald*, "How am I? Hungry. Tired. Sleepy, and thirsty, oh my god thirsty. That's so many hours in the sun, so many hard hours, but my wife and I have an autistic son and two other children, but for a family with five people, I might get \$1,500. It all adds up."

Olivia Aviles of Coral Springs told CBS, "We basically lost power, lost the food in our fridge, and then, you know, we're just here now trying to recoup some of it. We lost like a week of work, so we are now trying to recoup some of it."

Another resident, Nella Levy-Fogah, told CBS, "Some can't even go back to work—the jobs are not there. They lost so much during the hurricane and they need help and there's nowhere else to get it."

In Jacksonville, residents started lining up at 3 a.m. at a mall parking lot to apply for benefits, though the event did not start until 7 a.m., according to the *Florida Times-Union*. There was widespread confusion in the crowd, with many believing that actual food was being distributed. Many residents were also unaware that applications for the five days of the event were divided up according to the first letter of their last name, with only people with the last name beginning with A through D eligible to apply on the first day. Officials in many counties have been compelled to schedule an additional day to accommodate the overwhelming number of applicants.

In comments made to News4Jax.com, Tihanie

Mcvroom, a local resident who had lost power for six days after hurricane Irma, said, "I lost everything that I had, but I had to stay strong for my family to do what I had to do."

The Department of Children and Families has reported that as of Sunday more than 1.1 million residents have applied for assistance under the program.

The program, known as Disaster SNAP, is only available to those who are not already receiving regular SNAP benefits. Potential recipients can only qualify for the program if they can prove that they suffered a loss of income or property due to the hurricane. If approved, recipients receive an EBT card worth up to \$300 per person to spend on food. This sum is supposed to represent two months' worth of food costs and expires after 90 days.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>