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Health Department Employee Aids Florida's Hurricane Response

Christine Jacoby returns to work at the Health Department of Northwest Michigan this week after spending three weeks assisting in hurricane response in Florida.

Jacoby, an environmental sanitarian for the health department, has a wealth of previous experience in conducting housing inspections following natural disasters. "When I heard about the immense shortage of available housing inspectors following the hurricanes, I knew I wanted to put my training to good use. Every additional inspector makes a difference," said Jacoby. "When I brought up the idea to Scott Kendzierski, he was very supportive."

Kendzierski, division director for environmental health at the health department, said offering mutual aid during emergencies is a high priority for the health department. "After all, we would certainly welcome aid if it was Northwest Michigan facing some kind of disaster," said Kendzierski. "Our employees are uniquely qualified to assist a national response effort. Not only do they have specialized skills like nursing or conducting water supply, wastewater, and food safety inspections, but they are also trained in national emergency response protocols."

Lisa Peacock, Health Officer for the health department, has worked to make it easier for health department employees to assist in disaster response in other locations. "Our leadership agrees that this is important, so we put our heads together and found a way to support Jacoby's aid work financially. We're continuously looking for ways to reduce administrative barriers to offering mutual aid."

Kendzierski added that it's not only health department leadership that wanted to assist the aid effort. "It's easy for me to say Lisa and I support Christine's going, but really it's her fellow sanitarians who have made this possible," said Kendzierski. "Her coworkers were willing to support her workload here while she was gone, and keep health department operations going. It shows how much our health department values supporting national response, from our Health Officer and division directors to our sanitarians on the ground."

Jacoby said the area of Florida where she was deployed was not facing flooding, but extreme wind damage. "I inspected a lot of mobile homes. Roof covers were blown off, and trees had fallen on homes and cars. One mobile home I saw had the whole roof blown off – you could stand inside and see the sky." While assessing damage to structures and major appliances, Jacoby heard people's stories.

“People are traumatized. Some people couldn’t afford to leave – they were left with no water, no power, and high outdoor temperatures,” said Jacoby. With no power for a week and electrical surges damaging major appliances, people lost all the food they had stored in refrigerators and freezers. “The lost food and lost wages from missing work are a big concern for people living paycheck to paycheck.”

Jacoby’s work assessing the damage is an important step in beginning recovery after a hurricane. As Kendzierski said, “We’re all proud to have Christine on our team. She works hard every day to carry out our mission of addressing health problems of vulnerable populations and protecting the environment for our residents and visitors. She has carried that mission forward in her work in Florida, and shown her commitment to public health. Her passion for helping people out is obvious; it’s engrained in her.”

The Health Department of Northwest Michigan is mandated by the Michigan Public Health Code to promote wellness, prevent disease, provide quality healthcare, address health problems of vulnerable populations, and protect the environment for the residents and visitors of Antrim, Charlevoix, Emmet, and Otsego counties. For more information on the national hurricane response, please visit www.fema.gov.