

# Orlando Sentinel

## Influx of donations from Central Florida soon to be heading for Puerto Rico

As his C-47 “Gooney Bird” cargo plane lowered into Puerto Rico with donated supplies from Central Florida, Christopher “Doc” Bailey couldn’t believe the devastation the storm had inflicted.

The images in front of the retired U.S. Army National Guardsman were worse than he imagined.

“It’s like the whole island has been sandblasted,” said Bailey, president of the Florida Civilian Air Corps. “Unfortunately, it’s a lot worse than people think.”

For several weeks, he’s worked on coordinating a volunteer civilian air corps to help local organizations’ donations reach those on the island most in need. Bailey, who served in a long career as a med-evac pilot, said his air corps needs funding to keep planes airborne and ferrying supplies to aid the massive relief effort in the wake of Hurricane Maria.



One such collection by the group I-4 for Puerto Rico has about 1 million pounds of donations ready to be moved to the island, organizer Randy Ross said. After collecting all of the supplies over three weeks, Ross said he ran into trouble getting the goods across the water, which is where Bailey and others helped fill in the gaps.

This week a series of flights by both planes donated by corporations, and Bailey’s networks of pilots and planes, will be crucial to helping complete the task of transporting the food, water, diapers, generators and other much-needed supplies.

On Sunday, as he stood behind two 53-foot semi-trucks packed end to end, Ross said his group’s goal was to have all 1 million-plus pounds at Orlando and Miami airports and hopefully on flights this week.

“Often it’s people like Doc... who say, ‘Hey I’ve got a plane ... there’s 50,000 pounds available. Do you want to put things on it?’ ” said Ross, who plans on catching a ride to Puerto Rico with some of the donations Tuesday.

His donation drive has been aided by local charities and faith-based groups, as well as some from out of the area.

Chris Leader, the president of Kids Against Hunger, drove to Orlando from Atlanta early Sunday with a pair of brand-new generators inside his SUV. He hoped they would reach Puerto Rico alongside several other generators he’s donated and help cook the 250,000 meals his team already donated.

That will be the responsibility of Bailey and the corps he’s built statewide to help make that happen.

“If I’ve saved one person that’s great, but what happens if we’ve saved 50, or 100?” Bailey said. “I think the American spirit of people who know they can help will come together to help if they have a place to do it. What I’m going to do is give them the organization.”