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**Former Florida House Speakers Bense and Weatherford Launch  
REBUILD 850 Initiative to Help Promote Panhandle Recovery**

*Effort Will Keep Florida Panhandle Needs “Front and Center”  
and Encourage People to Donate, Volunteer, Visit, and Invest*

**TALLAHASSEE** — Former Florida House Speakers Allan Bense and Will Weatherford, joined by a diverse group of dedicated partner organizations, today launched [REBUILD 850](#), a new initiative to keep the continuing needs of communities in Florida’s Panhandle “front and center” following Hurricane Michael. The group issued a challenge for individuals, businesses, and organizations to donate, volunteer, visit, and invest to help the region, with Bense kicking off the effort by contributing \$25,000 to the new initiative.

The continuing awareness campaign unites the resources and efforts of Volunteer Florida, the Florida Chamber, the Florida Chamber Foundation, the Florida League of Cities, the Florida Association of Counties, the Florida Association of District School Superintendents, United Way of Florida, the American Red Cross, Get Ready, Florida! & FAIR Foundation, and the Florida Press Association. REBUILD 850’s dual objectives are to help residents of areas devastated by the power of Michael while promoting commerce in communities – ranging from Panama City Beach to Pensacola – that escaped the worst of the storm’s wrath and remain open for business. All funds will flow through the nonprofit Volunteer Florida Foundation.

“It’s natural after a disaster for immediate help and donations to flow and then ebb, as other news dominates the headlines,” Bense said. “But North Florida’s recovery will go on for months and even years, and we must keep the focus on helping so many communities through their ongoing needs.”

Weatherford expressed particular concern for poorer residents of the region, especially those living in rural and remote parts of the Panhandle.

“Once you see how people in these communities have been forced to live and how they are struggling, you can’t help but be moved,” Weatherford said. “We need to continue to tell their stories and keep long-term North Florida recovery in the public eye.”

REBUILD 850 aims to attract and engage the focused, ongoing support of businesses, charitable organizations, leaders, media, and millions of Floridians.

Mark Wilson, president and CEO of the Florida Chamber, said Florida's business community is committed to helping the area rebuild and re-establishing the region's economic base.

"It's clear that there are at least three types of needs in the affected communities: basic needs like food, shelter, and individual safety; promoting the region as open for business in parts that are open; and signaling to outside investors that the 850 region is actually full of outstanding investment potential," Wilson said. "We're all on the same page, and we're in this until there's not a need left."

"Residents of the affected areas have been blessed with the support of so many volunteers, but their struggles will remain long after this first wave of help subsides," said David Mica, Jr., CEO of Volunteer Florida. "By partnering with REBUILD 850, we will work to make sure North Florida residents continue to receive the help they need throughout the difficult months to come."

Jay Neal, president and CEO of FAIR Foundation added "we are proud to join this important initiative to focus intense and ongoing attention on the needs of the many communities in our Panhandle region that are so severely damaged by Hurricane Michael. As part of our commitment to the project, our 30-minute television program -- 'Get Ready, Florida!' -- will include meaningful attention on the affected region and will be broadcast statewide in several weeks."

Bense, a native of Panama City, which was devastated by Hurricane Michael, agreed that significant, new investment is needed in the region.

"In many of these communities, local businesses were absolutely obliterated and countless jobs were lost," he said. "There is a tremendous need for people with a vision for what these communities can be to invest in property, open businesses, and help lead a rebirth for places from Panama City and Mexico Beach to Marianna and Chipley."

Weatherford, who was the youngest person ever to serve as a presiding officer anywhere in the country when he became Florida Speaker in 2012, also called on political candidates to donate their leftover campaign funds to Panhandle recovery.

"The people of this area need our help, and our state and nation must join together to provide this desperately needed relief for our neighbors," Weatherford said. "Every election season, many candidates still have money in the bank after Election Day. This year, we urge all candidates throughout Florida to ask their contributors to support this effort by allowing their campaign contributions to be directed to rebuilding the Panhandle."

Donations to REBUILD 850 will be administered by Volunteer Florida's Florida Disaster Fund. The Florida Disaster Fund is the state's private fund established to assist communities following disasters. The funds are distributed to service organizations that will serve affected individuals throughout both disaster response and long-term recovery. During response, these organizations and volunteers assist with tree removal and debris cleanup, tarp installation,

mucking out and gutting of homes, and food distribution. Long-term recovery includes rebuilding homes, businesses, and communities while offering financial guidance and planning services.

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*The Florida Disaster Fund is the State of Florida's official private fund established to assist Florida's communities as they respond to and recover during times of emergency or disaster. In partnership with the public sector, private sector and other non-governmental organizations, the Florida Disaster Fund supports response and recovery activities. Donations to the Florida Disaster Fund are made to the Volunteer Florida Foundation, a 501(c)(3) charitable organization and are distributed to service organizations that will serve individuals within their communities with disaster response and recovery.*

***Additional comments from leadership participating in launch of REBUILD 850 initiative:***

**State Senator Bill Montford**

"You can't imagine the magnitude of the devastation if you haven't seen it for yourself. I know these people, and I have absolutely no doubt they will rebound from Hurricane Michael with all the grit and determination necessary. But I also know they simply can't do it alone. They need our help – lots of it. So I urge everyone, from one end of Florida to the other, to do whatever they can to help their neighbors in such a desperate time of need."

**Tony Carvajal, Executive Vice President of the Florida Chamber Foundation**

"The rebuilding process will undoubtedly take many months and many hands, but these communities will be restored and businesses around the state will play an important role in this process through their financial generosity. It's important that we all work together to re-establish the region's economic base, so the communities and people of North Florida can emerge from Michael with a bright future. At the same time, it's important that everyone recognizes that many parts of the region – stretching from Panama City Beach to Pensacola – fared better through the storm and remain open for business. Visitors and residents alike can help support the region by visiting areas that escaped the worst of Michael's destruction. And investors should recognize that the region is loaded with outstanding investment potential."

**Dean Ridings, President of the Florida Press Association**

"The devastation Hurricane Michael caused is the new reality for residents of the affected communities. We catch a glimpse of them for a few seconds in news stories, but they see it and live it every day. Countless news reporters from print, broadcast, and online outlets have done a fantastic job sharing the powerful and heart-wrenching stories affecting thousands of residents all across the Panhandle. These people are still suffering, and the rest of us must keep them in mind as the days and weeks roll by. The Florida Press Association is proud to be part of such a broad-based effort to raise the necessary resources for those most impacted by the storm."

**Ginger Delegal, Executive Director, Florida Association of Counties**

“While the federal government is providing assistance to 12 counties in the Panhandle, the road they face to recovery still has significant obstacles – both financially and emotionally. We are calling on communities across the state and nation to contribute to this fund, which will provide for the long-term and short-term needs of those most affected by Hurricane Michael. Through perseverance, we weathered this storm together, and now we have the responsibility to care for and bring relief to those in the affected counties.”

**Mike Sittig, Executive Director, Florida League of Cities**

“More than 50 cities and towns across the Panhandle were significantly and directly impacted by the destruction of Hurricane Michael. These municipalities and the people who live in them will rebuild, but it’s up to us as a state and nation to come together and surround them with support in the form of our time and our resources. We’re proud to be a part of this exciting and necessary effort that prioritizes rebuilding our Panhandle communities.”

**Ted Granger, President, United Way of Florida**

“The affected area is dotted with small, rural communities that, in the best of times, were challenged to meet local needs with strained, limited resources. Hurricane Michael further devastated the area and the lives of its residents. The United Way embraces its responsibility, and its opportunity, to help our Northwest Florida neighbors whose homes, businesses, and lives have been disrupted or destroyed by Hurricane Michael. Critical items remain in short supply for many residents, but the best way for people to help now is through financial contributions. REBUILD 850 is an outstanding way to pool resources so the generosity of Floridians and others is directed to the right places, at the right time.”

**Sharon Council Tyler, Executive Director, Capital Area Chapter of the American Red Cross**

“Words fail us when trying to describe the destruction suffered in these communities. Our team has been working with area residents, and initiatives like REBUILD 850 will make all the difference. This is the time to pull together and help our Northwest Florida neighbors. We cannot overstate the immediate issues affecting those living in these Panhandle communities. Residents are very much at risk once relief efforts subside, and it is so vitally important that efforts like REBUILD 850 keep a focus on support for those who need it so very much.”