

Our Fellow Americans Need Our Help

By: Veronica Cool ⌚ September 29, 2017



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In my mind, the glory of the sunny beaches, turquoise water and swaying palm trees is rarely tarnished by debris, 160 mph gales, floods and utter devastation. Unfortunately, that's Puerto Rico today, after Irma, Jose and Maria. It's experiencing a humanitarian crisis further exacerbated by the challenges of island logistics and its status as a U.S. territory.

Puerto Rico is not a U.S. state, but it is not a separate, autonomous country, either. It's this confusing hybrid "territory" that provides Puerto Rican residents with U.S. citizenship status but not full rights or access to U.S. benefits and protections. Although most individuals do not pay federal income taxes, Puerto Ricans DO pay taxes (Social Security taxes, Medicare, payroll and others).

Where does this leave them? Do we abandon them? After all, they are not really, really American...

WRONG! Some 3.4 million U.S. citizens live in Puerto Rico, and they are entitled to the same government response as any state.

This is a humanitarian crisis. When Haiti and Japan were struggling, the United States sent help. And yet we've allowed semantics and bureaucracy to prevent relief efforts to reach the island. And by the way, this island is ground zero for the smaller Antilles, the little islands like Dominica, St. Marten and the Virgin Islands that need tremendous support to rebuild and recuperate.

But the human spirit won't be deterred.



FILE – In this Wednesday, Sept. 27, 2017, file photo, people sit on both sides of a destroyed bridge that crossed over the San Lorenzo de Morovis River, in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, in Morovis, Puerto Rico. Maria has thrown Puerto Rico's already messy economic recovery plans into disarray. (AP Photo/Gerald Herbert, File)

We Can't Stand By

The community has been mobilizing independently of any FEMA/MEMA efforts, because those impacted, the people without power, water, food and medicine, are our family members, friends and colleagues. And quoting Mahatma Ghandi: "A nation's greatness is measured by how it treats its weakest members." We can't simply stand by, waiting. Recovery is sadly compounded by the economic and legal challenges of Puerto Rico's commonwealth status. Additionally, the bureaucratic and political grandstanding are impeding recovery efforts. Certain U.S. policies have contributed to Puerto Rico's economic deterioration. One of them is the Jones Act, an archaic law that forces Puerto Ricans to pay nearly double for U.S. goods through various tariffs, fees, and taxes. The act stipulates that any goods shipped from one American port to another must be on American-made-and-operated ships. Meaning shipping to Puerto Rico is costlier because there's little competition among freighters. On Sept. 28 — nine days after Maria destroyed Puerto Rico — Congress granted a 10-day waiver. Ten days is not sufficient.

Local efforts

As we know necessity is the mother of invention, so we, as a community have begun to invent our own solutions. Elda Devarie, owner of EMD Sales, Inc., a Baltimore-based food distributor, in conjunction with Telemundo has organized a food and supply drive. Theresa Daytner, president of Daytner Group Inc., is organizing planes/logistics/ships. Nathalia Cruz, a Realtor in Baltimore, is raising funds. And impressively, several businesses have offered evacuee housing and jobs, in essence resettlement services, especially for those in the health care fields.

As Peter Diamandis, founder of the SpaceX Prize, says, "The world's biggest problems are also the world's biggest business opportunities." Logically, Puerto Rico and the rest of these islands will not recover in the next couple of months. Recovery will take years. Businesses can help today, while also addressing staffing shortages.

How can you help?

- Political advocacy is necessary. Call the Capitol Switchboard, (202)224-3121, to be transferred to your lawmaker's office and urge that a disaster relief bill go to the floor, one which includes supplemental funding, community development block grants, federal resources for energy repair and security, environmental cleanup money, and Medicaid funding ASAP.
- Donate to Global Giving: A charity crowdfunding site that is attempting to raise \$2 million to be used exclusively for local relief and recovery efforts.
- Donate to the Salvation Army: The Christian charity is emphasizing its intentions to help with long-term recovery.

- Donate to AmeriCares: The nonprofit focused on medicine and health is seeking to provide emergency medical supplies and other basic resources to first responders and others.
- Sign up for 100Days X Puerto Rico at <https://www.100daysxpuertorico.org/> and follow the campaign on social media. This is a movement to rally U.S. citizens by providing simple tools to take concrete action to support Puerto Rico's recovery after the devastation caused by Hurricane Maria and the archipelago's long-term economic
- If you are a local business, reach out to me at Hola@coolassociatesllc.com and let me know if you can hire, house or donate any services/food/supplies.

I'm encouraged to see that the human spirit does not see color or borders, but I want to remind you that those suffering are our very own fellow Americans.
Amigos, please help.

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**This article was originally posted on The Daily Record.*

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