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TISHMAN CENTER · OCTOBER 6, 2017

Humanitarian Crisis in Puerto Rico Illuminates Long-standing Inequity for American Citizens, And

How You Can Help

By **Aida Rodriguez**

“Que dios te bendiga hija.” (“God bless you daughter.”) Those were the last words I heard from my 83-year-old mother at 1:30 am on September 20, 2017. It was very late but we decided to stay on the phone as long as possible. Then, the cable TV went out and we knew the electricity would go soon. We hung up. I have not been able to speak to mother again since then, 16 days ago. She lives in Isabela, Puerto Rico; I live in New York. Puerto Rico was devastated by Category 4-5 Hurricane Maria; Isabela is one of two towns still under the threat of a dam collapse.



Source: *Carlos Garcia Rawlins—Reuters*

I learned five days after the hurricane that my mother, aunt, and uncles are doing okay, for now. Regrettably, sixteen days after Category 4-5 Hurricane Maria hit the Island, Puerto Rico continues to suffer an almost complete communications blackout, no phone service, (1,360 out of 1,600 cellphone towers are down), no television, no WIFI/internet, no newspapers and only one operating radio station (WAPA). The lack of communications has intensified the humanitarian crisis unfolding on the Island: no electricity; no running water; limited food (none in some mountain towns); and almost no access to health care. Only one of the hospitals serving the

3.5 million people living on the Island
is now fully operational.

It will be four to six months before electricity is restored, months before cell towers are operating and years before the Island is fully stabilized. This has implications not only for the residents of Puerto Rico and their family members on the mainland but for the U.S. as a whole. Just yesterday, the New York Times reported on how Hurricane Maria has crippled Puerto Rico's pharmaceutical industry, which is expected to lead to critical shortages of certain drugs and medical devices on the mainland. There are 40 high-priority drugs that could run short on the mainland if disruptions in manufacturing and distribution continue. More than a dozen of the medications are only produced in Puerto Rico. There are rumors that hospitals and the EMT in South Carolina, Georgia, and Louisiana are preparing to house thousands of Puerto Ricans that were residing in Island nursing homes or need constant hospitalization. Florida is beginning to see a significant migration of Puerto Ricans from the Island. One hundred thousand people are expected to relocate (many permanently) to Florida.

Are Puerto Ricans responsible for this massive tragedy? No more than our brothers and sisters in Florida and

Texas, no more than the Hurricane Katrina victims. The slow and diminished response from the federal government to the crisis in Puerto Rico is evidence of how little Americans know about their fellow citizens on the Island (see articles in the Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, BBC and Bloomberg, and others).

Fewer than 50% of people residing in the US know that Puerto Ricans are granted US citizenship at birth. The infamous Jones Act granted US citizenship to Puerto Ricans in 1917 and also grandfathered Puerto Ricans born decades earlier. The people of Puerto Rico have fought as Americans in WWI, WWII, the Korean War and the Vietnam War. They act and think as Americans - because they are Americans! In fact, Isabela is a 10 minute drive from what used to be, until the 1950's, a U.S. military base. Many veterans of WW II were stationed in Puerto Rico. **What can you do?**

- **Educate yourself** about Puerto Rico's history. Educate others about Puerto Rico. The [Puerto Rico Syllabus](#) is one space with many resources.
- **Google "The Jones Act"** and find out why the U.S. president should work with Congress to quickly eliminate the Jones Act. The Jones Act has crippled the

Puerto Rican economy for a century. It will only make reconstruction in Puerto Rico much more expensive than necessary.

- **The nonprofit sector** here and on the Island is playing a significant role in assisting nonprofit organizations and individuals in Puerto Rico rebuild their homes and homeland. Some nonprofits you should Google include: The Hispanic Federation (NYC) has launched the [UNIDOS Disaster Relief Fund](#) to help meet hurricane-related needs and recovery in Puerto Rico. 100% of your gift to UNIDOS goes to help children and families recover from the devastation caused by Hurricane Maria; [Hispanics in Philanthropy](#) (network of more than 500 funders who support Latino causes and nonprofits); [Neighborhood Funders Group](#) (NFG); [Hurricane Maria Relief and Recovery Fund](#) (Maria Fund).
- **Public sector:** You can support the Puerto Rican relief efforts by donating essential goods and volunteer through efforts coordinated by the New York City and State governments. Mayor Bill de Blasio and New York City have launched an

effort to collect critically-needed items, such as diapers, baby food, and first aid supplies. To find a location go to the [Hispanic Federation website](#) and directly to the [Mayor's website](#). Governor Andrew Cuomo launched the [Empire State Relief and Recovery Effort for Puerto Rico](#) to collect donations and volunteer. Find the many locations involved in this effort.

- The **private sector** is playing an important role. [La Red de Fundaciones de Puerto Rico, Inc.](#), (The Network of Foundations of Puerto Rico, Inc.) is working to donate funds. There are others doing the same. Determine if your employer has a “matching gifts” program. You can then donate money to one of many funds to help Puerto Rico and have your donation matched by your employer.
- **Show you care.** For the many young mainland Puerto Ricans who are students, this continues to be a major distraction – they feel emotional pain, worry, and fear. Faculty and administrators should go out of their way to show empathy to those who are feeling the fear – students not only from Puerto Rico but

also from Mexico City, Houston, TX and Florida. Do not forget Puerto Ricans on the U.S. mainland are constantly worrying about their families and friends on the Island and the destruction of their hometowns. It is okay to ask a Puerto Rican friend “was your family affected”. To say “if you need an ear to listen, just call”.

- **Visit Puerto Rico** if you can, alone or with one of many groups going to the Island. Puerto Rico needs hard-working volunteers. But never, ever throw paper towels at Puerto Ricans.

Aida Rodriguez, PhD, recently retired as Professor of Professional Practice, Milano School of International Affairs, Management, and Urban Policy at The New School. Professor Rodriguez served as a senior officer (including foundation Vice-President) at The Rockefeller Foundation from 1983- 1999 when she joined The New School. At the New School, she served in various capacities, including Academic Dean and Chair of the Milano Management programs. She is recognized in the philanthropic sector in the United States and Latin America. A native New Yorker of Puerto Rican-Cuban heritage, she is an active member of the nonprofit community in New York City.