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Providing Legal Assistance in Times of Crisis

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PROVIDING LEGAL ASSISTANCE IN TIMES OF CRISIS

Working with the Puerto Rico Recovery Assistance Legal Clinic to provide legal support following the effects of Hurricane Maria.

BY BRIAN DETWEILER

As the plane descended into San Juan, I peered out my window and could see countless blue tarps in the neighborhoods surrounding the airport. More than four months had passed since Hurricane Maria ravaged the island in September 2017, and tens of thousands of these makeshift “blue roofs” now dotted all corners of Puerto Rico in place of roofs lost during the storm. I did not know it at the time, but this would be the first of many still-visible reminders of the destruction wrought by Maria’s Category 4 winds and rain.

Maria’s Aftermath

I found out I would be accompanying my law school’s Puerto Rico Recovery Assistance Legal Clinic a few days before we were scheduled to leave, and in the scramble to book a flight and pack up, I did not have time to prepare myself for what I would find when I landed. The tourist areas

of San Juan had more or less returned to normal, but traffic lights were still out across most of the city, and even here, in one the most densely populated areas of the island, some residents were still without power.

The situation at the University of Puerto Rico, where we worked when we were not in the field, was similar to the rest of San Juan; however, some areas of the campus, including the third floor of the Law Library, which had sustained significant water damage, remained closed for repairs. Samuel Serrano, the interim director, explained that the library sustained significant damage during the storm due to winds and flooding, and that staff were unable to reach the library until five days after Maria had passed through. Thanks to their herculean efforts, most of the library was open to students by the time I visited, and it reopened to the public in early February of 2018. Moreover, despite their many additional responsibilities, Serrano and his staff were gracious enough to assist the students and me with questions we had about local resources.

The Puerto Rico Recovery Assistance Legal Clinic

The Puerto Rico Recovery Assistance Legal Clinic was the brainchild of Vice Dean Kim Connolly, who directs our clinical legal education program at the University at Buffalo School of Law. After watching news coverage of Hurricane Maria's impact on the islands, she began planning what would become the law school's newest clinic, dedicated to "provid[ing] practical legal research and thoughtful pro bono service, through an ongoing collaborative effort to empower a resilient Puerto Rico."

The students who participated in the Clinic were selected based on their diverse talents and backgrounds. One of the students was a native of Puerto Rico, and other students were conversant in Spanish; some students had experience in areas of urban planning

On the first day outside of the city, our group of nine students split into two "brigades:" one legal and one humanitarian. I traveled an hour and a half west to Quebradillas with the Legal Brigade where we assisted attorneys with Ayuda Legal-Puerto Rico.

and sustainability, or in preparing presentations and working with community groups. Before leaving for Puerto Rico, the students each chose an area to research, ranging from community-based agriculture and power generation to issues with federal disaster relief or the local criminal justice system in the wake of the hurricane.

On the first day outside of the city, our group of nine students split into two "brigades:" one legal and one humanitarian. I traveled an hour and a half west to Quebradillas with the Legal Brigade where we assisted attorneys with Ayuda Legal-Puerto Rico who were helping survivors file FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) appeals. Our native Spanish speakers were able to participate most directly in client intake and assistance

while those of us who were less fluent researched issues related to the appeals process or called the FEMA Help Line for the attorneys, as the wait time for assistance in English was far shorter than for Spanish speakers.

As we would come to discover, assistance with FEMA appeals was desperately needed across the island. Apparently, some inspectors who were paid by FEMA to provide repair estimates never contacted the applicants or set foot inside the homes they were supposed to inspect before submitting their reports. In Quebradillas, we met survivors whose requests for assistance were met with outright denials, or were so low that they might as well have been denials. One client in particular received an offer of \$1,000 in assistance to repair her home, which she described as "a total loss."



The force of Hurricane Maria's winds blew the roofs off many homes on the island. The fact that this home does not have one of the blue tarps supplied by FEMA indicates it was likely abandoned after the storm.



Law students unload diapers and toiletries to be distributed to local residents in Arroyo.



Clinic staff attorney Karla Raimundi and student David Yovanoff show a new mother how to use a solar lamp and hand out much-needed diapers and baby wipes. Her baby was born shortly after the hurricanes hit in September and she had been caring for him without running water and electricity ever since.

On our second day in the field, my group headed to the south coast of the island to hand out solar lamps, cell phone chargers, towels, and toiletries. Here in the hills of rural Arroyo, survivors had been without power and potable water since Hurricane Irma hit Puerto Rico with a glancing blow two weeks before the direct hit of Hurricane Maria. We met a mother doing her best to care for her newborn, and several families struggling to care for bedridden grandparents, all still without power and running water.

Some of the residents we met fought back tears when we handed them their solar lamps, knowing they would have a dependable source of light that night for the first time in months. Despite the privation we witnessed, people in this isolated community seemed to have pulled together and were in good spirits. And while it was very gratifying to help our fellow citizens, we shared their frustration that they had lived so long without the most basic necessities.

Upon returning to San Juan each evening, we would reconvene at the students' Airbnb rental, which they nicknamed "The Big Brother House," to plan the next day's activities and work together on their research projects. It was great to unwind with the students in this more relaxed environment and get to know them better while also providing intensive, in-person research

support in a way that would not have been possible had I stayed in Buffalo.

Additionally, while the students saw firsthand the effects of poverty and the storm, and had some very spirited arguments at times, they maintained a very positive outlook during my time with them. We even managed to have some fun together. Upon our return from Arroyo, which was perhaps our most difficult day together, my group (we decided to call ourselves the Sharks) choreographed a *Westside Story*-style dance to challenge the other students who had spent the day providing legal assistance on another part of the island. Thankfully for my sake, a full-scale dance-off did not ensue.

While I had to head home after five days, the students and Vice Dean Connolly remained for an additional five days, continuing on their legal and humanitarian missions and meeting with key stakeholders in the legal community. Their efforts would lay the groundwork for the next group of students who headed to Puerto Rico in July 2018 to continue the work of the Clinic.

Road to Recovery

Puerto Rico has a long road to recovery ahead, but the people there demonstrated a level of kindness and resilience that I did not expect to encounter given their circumstances. Being able to help them and work so closely with students

was truly the highlight of my library career. I am very grateful to my director, Beth Adelman, for suggesting that I accompany the Clinic, and to Vice Dean Connolly and the students, for making me feel so welcome.

I was thrilled to join a new group of students in Puerto Rico this past summer, and I feel very fortunate to have built upon the strong relationship my library has developed with our clinical program, without which this opportunity would not have been possible. I sincerely hope that my law librarian colleagues will be able to participate in similar initiatives through their own institutions. ■

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READ

David E. Matchen Jr. and Jason Hawkins's article "Faced with Crisis," from the November/December 2015 issue of *AALL Spectrum* at bit.ly/ND15Crisis.



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