A Quick Response to Puerto Rico's Urgent Need

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A quick response to Puerto Rico’s urgent need

#UBLawResponds

In times of crisis, immediate action and collaborative efforts are crucial to recovery. Recent devastation brought by Hurricane Maria left thousands of Puerto Ricans in critical need of legal assistance. In response, the University at Buffalo School of Law reacted swiftly, launching a new law clinic, the Puerto Rico Recovery Assistance Legal Clinic, and reaching out to the law school community for its support. As a result, through this clinic, a group of specially trained law students will learn relevant law in Buffalo, and then travel to Puerto Rico in January to offer hands-on legal assistance, providing direct access to justice for those in urgent need.

“Puerto Rico is facing not just a natural disaster, but a legal disaster,” says Kim Diana Connolly, professor and vice dean for advocacy and experiential education, and director of the law school’s clinical legal education program. “As electricity and other basics have started to come online for less than half of the island’s citizens – more than three months after the hurricane – the people of the island must adjust to a new normal. The demand for legal assistance has become paramount. The immediate needs are vast, and we are working with experts on the ground in Puerto Rico to identify the best projects for UB School of Law students to handle. Needs range from direct legal representation of individuals and families, to supporting those working within the Puerto Rican legal system trying to help citizens best navigate this tragedy – UB School of Law is working to design the best response.”

During December and January, students will prepare by doing research for and participating in intensive training from law school faculty, alumni and other legal experts including attorneys in Puerto Rico. Students will acquire the skills and substantive knowledge required to address legal aspects of disaster response. Connolly will coordinate the program, including rigorous classes that will take place at the law school.

After the class component is completed, students will travel to Puerto Rico for a 10-day service experience, providing essential legal assistance as supervised student attorneys. In addition to earning academic credit for their participation, students will emerge with practical skills and firsthand experience applying the rule of law to restore order and justice in an unsettled context.

Luis Chiesa, a criminal law professor at the law school and a native of Puerto Rico, will act as an academic consultant. “It is heartening to know that a group of UB law clinic students will head to my hometown of Puerto Rico to deliver sorely needed legal services,” says Chiesa. “This will not only benefit Puerto Rico, but also our students, as it affords them the opportunity to apply the legal skills that they have honed during the course of their legal studies.”

The greater law school community will participate, as volunteer alumni and faculty have agreed to consult in their areas of expertise in order to support the law students serving clients in Puerto Rico. Alumni and friends have also made generous donations to help offset travel and other expenses incurred by the students while providing legal assistance.

“Access to justice is at the heart of everything we do at the law school and this initiative is a perfect example,” says Aviva Abramovsky, dean of the law school. “We have a long history of providing pro bono service and teaching our students to view the world with compassion, knowing that regardless of where they ultimately choose to work, they have a moral responsibility, as lawyers and as leaders, to use their skills and knowledge to ensure justice and to give back.”

Want to join our efforts?

Donations are needed to help offset the costs associated with sending law students to provide critical assistance.
To learn more about the clinic or to make a donation, visit:
law.buffalo.edu/support-puerto-rico-clinic
Or contact:
Professor Kim Diana Connolly
Director of Clinical Legal Education
(716) 645-2092
kimconno@buffalo.edu
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How YOU can help

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