



New York Helps Puerto Rico Recover From Hurricane Maria

As the island readies for hurricane season, the Empire State and Gov. Andrew Cuomo continue to pledge volunteers and aid to help Puerto Rico rebuild from past storms.

(Mario Tama/Getty Images)

New York Helps Puerto Rico Recover From Hurricane Maria

As the island readies for hurricane season, the Empire State and Gov. Andrew Cuomo continue to pledge volunteers and aid to help Puerto Rico rebuild from past storms.



f [_ \(https://w](https://w)

Kids play basketball next to storm debris still waiting to be collected on Dec. 25, 2017, in Morovis, Puerto Rico. (Mario Tama/Getty Images)

By [Susan Milligan \(https://www.usnews.com/topics/author/susan-milligan\)](https://www.usnews.com/topics/author/susan-milligan), Senior Writer | May 29, 2018, at 3:05 p.m.

TOA BAJA, Puerto Rico – The cabinets and furniture destroyed by [Hurricane Maria](https://www.usnews.com/news/national-news/articles/2017-09-20/hurricane-maria-makes-landfall-in-puerto-rico) (<https://www.usnews.com/news/national-news/articles/2017-09-20/hurricane-maria-makes-landfall-in-puerto-rico>) have been removed, and the rooms of a cement house in this small northern island town have been power-washed, the "mudline" just a foot or so from the ceiling the only sign of how high the water rose during the September 2017 storm. Next, the yellow hard-hatted volunteers from All Hands and Hearts will sanitize the walls and floors, readying the home for the June arrival of university students and building trades professionals who will make the home move-in ready for the couple who lived there.

RELATED CONTENT



[https://www.usnews.com/news/healthiest-communities/articles/2018-](https://www.usnews.com/news/healthiest-communities/articles/2018-05-22/puerto-rico-looks-to-build-a-better-health-system-after-hurricanes-maria-irma)

[05-22/puerto-rico-looks-to-build-a-better-health-system-after-hurricanes-maria-irma\)](https://www.usnews.com/news/healthiest-communities/articles/2018-05-22/puerto-rico-looks-to-build-a-better-health-system-after-hurricanes-maria-irma)

[https://www.usnews.com/news/healthiest-communities/articles/2018-05-22/puerto-rico-looks-to-build-a-better-health-system-after-hurricanes-maria-irma\)](https://www.usnews.com/news/healthiest-communities/articles/2018-05-22/puerto-rico-looks-to-build-a-better-health-system-after-hurricanes-maria-irma) **A Healthy Renewal for Puerto Rico**

[https://www.usnews.com/news/healthiest-communities/articles/2018-05-22/puerto-rico-looks-to-build-a-better-health-system-after-hurricanes-maria-irma\)](https://www.usnews.com/news/healthiest-communities/articles/2018-05-22/puerto-rico-looks-to-build-a-better-health-system-after-hurricanes-maria-irma)

[RELATED: [A Healthy Renewal for Puerto Rico \(https://www.usnews.com/news/healthiest-communities/articles/2018-05-22/puerto-rico-looks-to-build-a-better-health-system-after-hurricanes-maria-irma\)](https://www.usnews.com/news/healthiest-communities/articles/2018-05-22/puerto-rico-looks-to-build-a-better-health-system-after-hurricanes-maria-irma)]

It's not a U.S. government effort, or even a project of the cash-strapped Puerto Rican government. The renovation and rebuilding comes courtesy of a volunteer project organized by [New York \(https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/new-york\)](https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/new-york) state, which has undertaken what participants and island locals describe as an extraordinary effort by a single state government and populace to help the American territory.

"A lot of people here, they're getting very little assistance from FEMA," or the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which has been criticized both in Puerto Rico and the mainland for a slow response to the storm, says Sarah Jahr, the 24-year-old All Hands and Hearts project manager on the site. "We just want to get people back safely into their homes as soon as possible."

The home was one of 30 the All Hands and Hearts team had in their queue to finish (all residents are eligible for assistance, but elderly and disabled people are given first preference). UNICEF USA has about 1,000 on its island-wide waiting list. The volunteer work spares some Puerto Ricans from having to hire private contractors who might use the disaster to gouge desperate, displaced people, notes Audrey McMullen, operations manager for the effort. And since some Puerto Ricans don't have formal paperwork proving they own their homes (which may have been passed down generations), they cannot apply for aid from FEMA, which requires such documentation to prevent fraud.

States often come to the aid of other states (as well as the U.S. territories of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands) after a disaster, sending police, medical professionals and other help to get the damaged area back on its feet. Much of the assistance is provided through the Emergency Management Assistance Compact, a sort of mutual state aid society. The sending states are reimbursed for costs later.



Sarah Jahr, left, and Audrey McMullen, center, are volunteers with All Hands and Hearts who are power-washing a damaged home in Toa Baja, Puerto Rico. The house, severely damaged by Hurricane Maria, will undergo further renovation by SUNY and CUNY students under the supervision of volunteer building and trades professionals under a program by New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo. (COURTESY EDISON SABALA)

But New York, which has the second biggest contingent of Puerto Ricans outside the island itself, has taken an unusually assertive and direct role in helping the island recover and rebuild. Just as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which was tasked with rebuilding the damaged and unreliable power grid, left the island on May 18, a new team of New Yorkers was on its way to help.

"When you're talking about Puerto Rico, you're talking about American citizens and American brothers and sisters, and there are no second-class American citizens. And Puerto Rico deserves better from the federal government," New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo said on a recent visit to Puerto Rico, his fourth trip to the island since Maria hit Sept. 20. "And New York will do everything it can."

The effort may benefit Cuomo, as well: The two-term Democratic governor has re-election on his mind, and Puerto Rican voters (as well as New Yorkers with family on the island) are an important part of the Democratic vote. But locals in the U.S. territory, who do not hesitate to slam the federal government for what they see as an inadequate and delayed response, are quick to single out the New York pol and laud him for his commitment.

"Cuomo's done a lot. He really cares. And we really appreciate it," says San Juan resident Oliria Ratcliffe, who had to physically barricade her kitchen window during Maria with her body to keep out the wind and rain.

In New York's first phase immediately following the storm, the state sent more than 1,000 personnel to the island, including more than 450 New York utility personnel, more than 50 Tactical Power Restoration experts and 15 damage assessment experts. The state also sent National Guard police, engineers and soldiers, state troopers, volunteer medical professionals, four Black Hawk helicopters and a logistical support team from the state Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Services. Meanwhile, the state delivered millions of items, from bottles of water to diapers and solar lamps, collected from 13 donation sites across New York. The Empire State also sent more than 155,000 miles of utility cable and other power restoration materials, as well as \$1 million in medical supplies, in partnership with the Greater New York Hospital Association and the Afya Foundation.



[Photos: Puerto Rico in Ruins](#)

🔍 [EXPAND GALLERY](#)

The utility workers helped fully restore power to 300,000 customers in the San Juan metro area, the governor's office reports, and now, state utility experts are working to make the island's power grid stronger and more resilient to storms. As part of the NY Stands with Puerto Rico Recovery and Rebuilding Initiative, a 10-person team from the New

York Power Authority arrived in April to help local authorities assess the grid and identifying its weaknesses. The idea is – as New York and Puerto Rican officials call it – to "Build Back Better" so the island does not again suffer widespread blackouts.

Also in April, the governor sent a multi-disciplinary Tactical Assessment Team of labor, nonprofit rebuilding, philanthropic and academic partners – all of whom are developing a near-term plan to help damaged communities rebuild. Recently, a group of cadets from the State University of New York's maritime team, in a SUNY Maritime College (<https://www.usnews.com/best-colleges/suny-maritime-2853>) training vessel, was set to arrive in San Juan's port to coordinate with nonprofits and transport supplies.

That will set the stage for another group of volunteers to begin arriving in June: 500 SUNY and City University of New York students who will work with building trade union volunteers to fully repair damaged homes. The young people, whose trips are subsidized by a \$500,000 grant from the charity UNICEF, will typically come for two-week stints throughout the summer, sleeping in a compound and working with All Hearts and Hands and other nongovernmental organizations.

"This is going to be a transformative experience for these students," who will not only provide critical help to Puerto Ricans in need, but will learn construction skills (such as sealing a roof), says Edison Sabala, the Humanitarian Response Management Consultant for UNICEF USA who has been on the ground coordinating efforts in Puerto Rico. Other charities involved in the New York-organized effort include the Carlos Beltran Foundation, HEART 9/11, Habitat for Humanity NYC, the Hispanic Federation, the Partnership for NYC, Tidal, the St. Bernard Project and Team Rubicon.

Cuomo has taken some heat for the intense focus on Puerto Rico. State Sen. John DeFrancisco, the second-ranking Republican in the chamber who was exploring a run for governor, lambasted the governor on Twitter last fall, saying "\$1 million for Puerto Rico, but [Cuomo] says same \$ can't be found to help NY seniors/disabled because of budget? I rest my case." A gubernatorial spokesman called the tweet "appalling," noting that the cash came from private donations. DeFrancisco dropped out of the GOP primary in late April.

Students and faculty at various SUNY and CUNY campuses had been engaged in separate efforts to help Puerto Rico after the storm, but the current project provides for a more coordinated mission, says Robert Balkin, director for SUNY's Office for Latin America and Caribbean. Many of the building trades specialists – who are taking unpaid time to help rebuild, and to supervise the students – are themselves SUNY graduates, says Balkin, part of the team coordinating SUNY's participation in Cuomo's initiative.

RELATED CONTENT



(<https://www.usnews.com/news/the-report/articles/2018-05-11/skilled->

[workers-are-leaving-puerto-rico-in-droves](#))

<https://www.usnews.com/news/the-report/articles/2018-05-11/skilled-workers-are-leaving-puerto-rico-in-droves>)
[The Skilled Worker Exodus \(https://www.usnews.com/news/the-report/articles/2018-05-11/skilled-workers-are-leaving-puerto-rico-in-droves\)](https://www.usnews.com/news/the-report/articles/2018-05-11/skilled-workers-are-leaving-puerto-rico-in-droves)

[RELATED: [The Skilled Worker Exodus \(https://www.usnews.com/news/the-report/articles/2018-05-11/skilled-workers-are-leaving-puerto-rico-in-droves\)](https://www.usnews.com/news/the-report/articles/2018-05-11/skilled-workers-are-leaving-puerto-rico-in-droves)]

And several SUNY campuses have programs that give student volunteers a base for the work they are about to do, he adds: University at Albany--SUNY (<https://www.usnews.com/best-colleges/suny-albany-2835>), for example, has a College of Emergency Management, Homeland Security and Cybersecurity (the first of its kind in the nation); the state college at Alfred has an emergency management studies program, and the state college at New Paltz has an Institute for Disaster Mental Health (and a minor in the discipline). "They'll be coming down, already with levels of skills that will allow them to jump right in," Balkin says.

Meanwhile, the building and trades experts will be helping to train local Puerto Ricans as well, so islanders can take control of their own long-term infrastructure, he says.

The New York effort supplements assistance by other states through EMAC, which allows states (once they are formally asked by the jurisdiction in need) to provide all sorts of disaster personnel. "Every state can't have all the resources it needs. We share. It's a very efficient way of doing business," says Michael A. Sprayberry, president of the National Emergency Management Association, which runs the EMAC program. Sprayberry calculates that "hundreds of people" - planning and logistics experts, building and construction teams, law enforcement, debris management and water purification experts, and physical and mental health professionals, have been sent to the island since the storm.

But the effort comes with some strings: The receiving state (or territory) eventually has to reimburse the sending states. And states can't just put people on a plane - they have to be asked to provide the assistance. "We and other states don't and can't, really, legally help unless there's a request," says Chris Besse, spokesman for the Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency. "As soon as we saw (a request) we started responding," says Besse, noting that the Bay State has benefited from the help of other states during severe snowstorms.

And while the teams sent by EMAC have now departed the island, New York is still sending people and supplies. There's no set deadline for leaving, with Cuomo's office saying the governor pledges "to be there every step of the way." The 2018 hurricane season starts June 1.

Clarified on May 29, 2018: This story was updated to reflect that the last statement was from the office of New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo.

Tags: [Puerto Rico \(https://www.usnews.com/topics/locations/puerto_rico\)](https://www.usnews.com/topics/locations/puerto_rico), [hurricanes \(https://www.usnews.com/topics/subjects/hurricanes\)](https://www.usnews.com/topics/subjects/hurricanes), [Hurricane Maria \(https://www.usnews.com/topics/subjects/hurricane-maria\)](https://www.usnews.com/topics/subjects/hurricane-maria), [New York \(https://www.usnews.com/topics/locations/new_york\)](https://www.usnews.com/topics/locations/new_york), [natural disasters \(https://www.usnews.com/topics/subjects/natural_disasters\)](https://www.usnews.com/topics/subjects/natural_disasters), [volunteering \(https://www.usnews.com/topics/subjects/volunteering\)](https://www.usnews.com/topics/subjects/volunteering), [FEMA \(https://www.usnews.com/topics/organizations/fema\)](https://www.usnews.com/topics/organizations/fema), [government \(https://www.usnews.com/topics/subjects/government\)](https://www.usnews.com/topics/subjects/government), [Andrew Cuomo \(https://www.usnews.com/topics/people/andrew_cuomo\)](https://www.usnews.com/topics/people/andrew_cuomo), [military \(https://www.usnews.com/topics/subjects/military\)](https://www.usnews.com/topics/subjects/military), [Department of Homeland Security \(https://www.usnews.com/topics/organizations/department_of_homeland_security\)](https://www.usnews.com/topics/organizations/department_of_homeland_security), [first aid \(https://www.usnews.com/topics/subjects/first-aid\)](https://www.usnews.com/topics/subjects/first-aid)

Susan Milligan (<https://www.usnews.com/topics/author/susan-milligan>) is a political and foreign affairs writer and contributed to a biography of the late Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, ([## Recommended Articles](http://www.amazon.com/gp/redirect.html?ie=UTF8&location=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.amazon.com%2FLast-Lion-Fall-Rise-Kennedy%2Fdp%2FB002VPEAK8%3Fie%3DUTF8%26s%3Dbooks%26qid%3D1298662719%26sr%3D8-1&tag=usnpoliticsandpolicy-20&linkCode=ur2&camp=1789&creative=9325)... full bio »)</p></div><div data-bbox=)



(<https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/slideshows/10-best-states-in-america?int=undefined-rec>)

The 10 Best States in America
(<https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/slideshows/10-best-states-in-america?int=undefined-rec>)

Megan Trimble

(<https://www.usnews.com/topics/author/megan-trimble>) | Feb. 27, 2018

See which states are better than their neighbors.



(<https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/slideshows/10-best-states-for-education?int=undefined-rec>)

The 10 Best U.S. States for Education
(<https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/slideshows/10-best-states-for-education?int=undefined-rec>)

Megan Trimble

(<https://www.usnews.com/topics/author/megan-trimble>) | Feb. 27, 2018

These states are the best in America for educating students at all levels.

California Fires May Make Homeowners Insurance Harder to Get (<https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/california/article/2018-02-19/california-fires-may-make-homeowners-insurance-harder-to-get>)

[states/california/articles/2018-08-13/california-fires-may-make-homeowners-insurance-harder-to-get?int=undefined-rec\)](#)

Aug. 13, 2018

California's battle with wildfires may hurt availability, raise the cost of homeowners insurance.

[Minnesota GOP Governor Primary Tests Pawlenty's Comeback Bid \(https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/minnesota/articles/2018-08-13/minnesota-gop-governor-primary-tests-pawlentys-comeback-bid?int=undefined-rec\)](#)

Aug. 13, 2018

Former Gov. Tim Pawlenty's political rebirth gets its first test in Minnesota's primary election, where he's heavily favored to be Republicans' choice for governor.

[Crews Searching for Man After Boating Accident \(https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/tennessee/articles/2018-08-13/crews-searching-for-man-after-boating-accident?int=undefined-rec\)](#)

Aug. 13, 2018

Officials say they are looking for one person after a boating accident in Tennessee.

[Maine Voters Can Now Request Absentee Ballots Online \(https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/maine/articles/2018-08-13/maine-voters-can-now-request-absentee-ballots-online?int=undefined-rec\)](#)

Aug. 13, 2018

Maine voters can now request absentee ballots for this November's election online.

[Drive-By Shooter Fires Shots at Occupied House in Manchester \(https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/connecticut/articles/2018-08-13/drive-by-shooter-fires-shots-at-occupied-house-in-manchester?int=undefined-rec\)](#)

Aug. 13, 2018

Police say an unknown gunman fired shots at an occupied house in Connecticut, but no one was injured.

[Candidates Make the Rounds in Final Day of Primary Campaign \(https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/minnesota/articles/2018-08-13/candidates-make-the-rounds-in-final-day-of-primary-campaign?int=undefined-rec\)](#)

Aug. 13, 2018

Candidates running for Minnesota governor in both parties are hitting the road to make last-minute pitches to the voters who will choose nominees in each party.

[Mississippi Man Accused of Choking Other Man in Apartment \(https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/mississippi/articles/2018-08-13/mississippi-man-accused-of-choking-other-man-in-apartment\)](#)

[Mississippi Man Accused of Snooting Other Man in Argument \(https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/mississippi/articles/2018-08-13/mississippi-man-accused-of-shooting-other-man-in-argument?int=undefined-rec\)](https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/mississippi/articles/2018-08-13/mississippi-man-accused-of-shooting-other-man-in-argument?int=undefined-rec)

Aug. 13, 2018

A man has been accused of shooting another man during an argument in Mississippi.

[Woman Admits She Stole From Adopted Parents to Fuel Drug Use](https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/connecticut/articles/2018-08-13/woman-admits-she-stole-from-adopted-parents-to-fuel-drug-use?int=undefined-rec)

[\(https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/connecticut/articles/2018-08-13/woman-admits-she-stole-from-adopted-parents-to-fuel-drug-use?int=undefined-rec\)](https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/connecticut/articles/2018-08-13/woman-admits-she-stole-from-adopted-parents-to-fuel-drug-use?int=undefined-rec)

Aug. 13, 2018

A Connecticut woman has pleaded guilty to breaking into her adoptive parents' home and stealing jewelry in order to fuel her drug habit.

Load More



**BEST
STATES**

Best States is an interactive platform developed by U.S. News for ranking the 50 U.S. states, alongside news analysis and daily reporting. The platform is designed to engage citizens and government leaders in a discussion about what needs improvement across the country. The data was provided by McKinsey & Company's Leading States Index.

[Home \(/news/best-states\)](/news/best-states)

[Rankings \(/news/best-states/rankings\)](/news/best-states/rankings)

[Methodology \(/news/best-states/articles/methodology\)](/news/best-states/articles/methodology)

[FAQ \(/news/best-states/articles/frequently-asked-questions\)](/news/best-states/articles/frequently-asked-questions)

[Twitter \(https://twitter.com/usnews\)](https://twitter.com/usnews)

[Facebook \(https://www.facebook.com/usnewsandworldreport\)](https://www.facebook.com/usnewsandworldreport)

Copyright 2018 © U.S. News & World Report L.P. [Terms and Conditions \(https://www.usnews.com/info/features/terms\)](https://www.usnews.com/info/features/terms)

[Privacy Policy \(https://www.usnews.com/features/info/privacy\)](https://www.usnews.com/features/info/privacy)