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## **Prepare, Practice, Perform: Lessons Learned by Tampa Bay Nonprofits and Faith-based Agencies in the Aftermath of Hurricane Maria**

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As Floridians prepare for the start of the upcoming holidays, we have much to be thankful for including the end of another hurricane season. While 2020 will be remembered for having a record setting number of named storms leaving destruction and loss across the U.S., it was Tropical Storm Eta that made a direct landfall just north of Tampa. Eta's path was marked by damage from strong winds and rainfall, and at least one death. Despite the impact of the storm, residents of the Tampa Bay area were assured that the public and private sectors serving our community were ready to aid in sheltering, feeding, and caring for individuals and families impacted by this natural hazard. Indeed, local government and voluntary agencies are the backbone to an organized system most of us rely on for emergency preparedness, response, and recovery in our communities. But what happens when those same agencies are called upon to provide assistance for a disaster that occurs geographically outside the U.S. mainland? That was the challenge in 2017 when Hurricane Maria made landfall in Puerto Rico leaving behind catastrophic destruction and loss of life. It is estimated that 135,000 Puerto Ricans migrated to Florida to seek safety in the aftermath of the hurricane.



In partnership with the Latino Coalition of Tampa Bay, a series of focus groups and stakeholder interviews were conducted with nonprofit and faith-based frontline workers and agency leaders who delivered resources and services to evacuees from Hurricane Maria in 2017. Specifically, the evacuees were residents of Puerto Rico who resettled, short- or long-term, in the Tampa Bay area. Our goal was to understand the most pressing challenges encountered by local Tampa Bay nonprofit and faith-based organizations as they attempted to

provide disaster services to evacuees.

What made this study unique was that the disaster event occurred outside the state of Florida, yet the devastating impact on Puerto Rico resulted in a significant number of survivors seeking aid by traveling to Florida for relief and recovery assistance. Although the disaster did not happen in the Tampa Bay region, we attempted to draw something positive from this crisis by examining important lessons learned to strengthen community resilience post-disaster. Two crucial questions were asked: 1) Will we be ready when a hurricane hits the Tampa area?; and 2) How can we better prepare our nonprofit and faith-based organizations now for relief and recovery services when our neighbors are the survivors?

### **What We Learned**

It was no surprise to learn our local Tampa Bay nonprofit and faith-based organizations are vital in addressing the needs of individuals and families in rebuilding their lives after a disaster. What was astonishing to learn, however, was the overwhelming commitment of frontline staff and leaders in these organizations to provide post-disaster services to those in need even for a disaster that was geographically located outside west-central Florida. This is critical as the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) requires everyone to do more with fewer government resources. Indeed, Tampa Bay nonprofit and faith-based organizations conducted the bulk of the work to provide services and support to families that evacuated from Puerto Rico in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria while continuing to meet the needs of local Tampa families experiencing daily life crises.

Many frontline staff went above and beyond in their efforts to obtain resources, manage caseloads, and ensure the well-being of those traumatized by the disaster including many who were separated from their extended families left behind on the island.

We also learned that service delivery to address education and employment needs seemed to meet with success, while attempting to meet the needs of individuals with chronic health issues and locating adequate shelter—given the existing demand for housing in Tampa—were significant challenges. In all, the greatest lessons learned for our nonprofit and faith-based organizations engaged in disaster relief and recovery can be summarized in three words: Prepare, Practice, Perform. This is captured in several key recommendations to support the vital work of our voluntary organizations engaged in delivery of disaster assistance.

#### ***External Organization Coordination:***

Nonprofit and faith-based organizations are vital to community level disaster relief and recovery efforts post-disaster; therefore, the better organized and prepared these organizations are, the more effective and efficient they will be in promoting community resilience. Participants agreed that a focus on External Organization Coordination (EOC) would aid on this front. EOC would involve maximizing resources through strategic partnerships with larger organizations and institutions. Having these partnerships in place well in advance of a disaster will aid in the quick deployment of resources through an established plan for efficient distribution. EOC may also help organizations integrate strengths resulting in innovative approaches to avoid what some participants referred to as the "transient victim syndrome," where some people travel to multiple organizations receiving duplicate resources, while others are unable to get their basic needs met.



#### ***After Action Accountability:***

Although many nonprofit and faith-based organizations are strongly engaged in meeting immediate needs of survivors, far fewer are invested in documenting the service delivery process including how people are being helped and the outcomes from these humanitarian efforts. This could be addressed through an Action and Accountability Review (AAR). The review may include: 1) a Process evaluation to document what was done and how it was accomplished; 2) an Outcome evaluation to document what services were delivered and to whom (demographics); and 3) an Impact evaluation to document whether these actions made a difference and how the situation changed as a result. Combining evaluation data with anecdotal evidence can help an organization document its' effectiveness and demonstrate to staff their valuable contributions. It also offers an opportunity to improve operations and develop innovative strategies for future service delivery. These data may also be valuable should there be an opportunity to seek reimbursement through FEMA.

#### ***Triage and Trauma Informed Care:***

Most providers of humanitarian services work tirelessly to address the needs of others, taking little time to care for themselves. Increasing threats from natural hazards correlate with increased exposure to personal and community trauma. Disasters are mass events leaving nonprofit and faith-based organizations to cope with significantly greater demands for immediate services and resources. It is not surprising that participants in this study overwhelmingly acknowledged issues of triage and trauma as they responded to survivors of Hurricane Maria. Workshops and trainings in self-care may aid frontline workers to recognize their own signs of stress and to have knowledge on how to deal with those stressors. Vicarious trauma among nonprofit and faith-based workers providing humanitarian care often goes under-reported due to the desire of helpers to focus on the needs of others rather than their own. It is important to practice community healing for all.



Hurricane Maria brought devastation and destruction to the island of Puerto Rico, forever altering the lives and livelihoods of many. Survivors who were able to seek aid through short- or long-term resettlement in the Tampa Bay area were assisted by our local voluntary organizations. This sector plays an integral role in helping communities build their resilience to a natural disaster. Hurricane Maria provided an opportunity to examine the challenges encountered by many nonprofit and faith-based agencies as they assisted evacuees from Puerto Rico. This study resulted in several recommendations emanating from frontline staff to build upon the unique strengths of the nonprofit and faith-based core as they strive to Prepare, Practice, and Perform successfully in the next hurricane season.