



Lions Clubs International
FOUNDATION

Disaster Relief: Hope for the Future



Desperate Humanitarian Crisis



On the morning of Wednesday, September 20, 2017, Hurricane Maria struck Puerto Rico, devastating the island and plunging all of its 3.4 million residents into a desperate humanitarian crisis.

Hurricane Maria, the worst storm to hit Puerto Rico in over 80 years, arrived two short weeks after Hurricane Irma passed just north of the island, leaving over a million people without power. The effect on families — and the island's infrastructure — will take many long years to overcome.

With Maria bearing down on Puerto Rico, a number of thoughts were on Lion Miriam Vázquez's mind. As executive director of the Lions Eye Bank in San Juan, she knew the clinic's supply of corneas, generous gifts from organ donors, had to be packed on ice (the delicate tissue must be stored at 34 degrees to 46 degrees Fahrenheit) and moved to a hospital equipped with backup power generators. If Maria proved to be as powerful as predicted, the Eye Bank's small generator couldn't be relied on for a prolonged electrical outage.

Lions Clubs International Foundation (LCIF) awarded a US\$100,000 grant to the Lions of Multiple District 51 to support disaster relief in Puerto Rico. Visit [lcif.org/Grants](https://lci.org/Grants) to learn more about grant funding to help Lions' districts develop and implement large-scale humanitarian projects.

Staring Down Hurricane Maria



There's a checklist of routine pre-disaster errands people in the Caribbean follow. Fill cars with gas. Withdraw money from the ATM. Stock up on dry goods, water and batteries. Storm-proof homes and apartments by securing flower pots and loose patio furniture, latch shutters, and stuff towels around leaky windows and door seams. Working feverishly to complete her checklist for the clinic and her own home, Vázquez kept thinking about her daughter Maria, who was eight months pregnant. Had the mother-to-be made the right decision to stay in Puerto Rico?

Extended family in Chicago, Illinois, USA, had invited her to stay with them for safety. But Maria doubted her health insurance would cover the bill if she delivered the baby in a hospital off the island. Maria felt confident she could stare down a natural disaster, but the possibility of amassing considerable financial debt made her anxious.

Knowing her mother would worry, Maria invited Vázquez and her husband to stay with her the night of the storm. "That way you can be relaxed knowing that I'm okay," Maria said. Vázquez and her husband packed a bag and enacted a scene playing out in homes across Puerto Rico, as family and friends came together to cook dinner, watch the weather report and try to get some sleep.

“ It was scary, it was really scary. We knew there were a lot of people who lost their homes and didn't have food. They didn't have supermarkets, they didn't have ATMs, and they had no power.
– Lion Miriam Vazquez, Sabana Llana Lions Club

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Giving Hope

When disaster strikes anywhere in the world, Lions can apply for emergency grants through LCIF. Most emergency grants are US\$10,000 and intended to meet victims' immediate needs to help transition their lives back to normality afterwards. But in some cases of extreme devastation, LCIF issues major catastrophe grants of up to US\$250,000.

LCIF Humanitarian Initiatives Manager KaSondra Byrd is often the first person Lions call when natural disaster strikes. "I know more about disasters than I ever thought I would." Though Byrd hadn't yet heard from Lions in Puerto Rico, she knew from news reports that Hurricane Maria had created devastation deserving of a major catastrophe grant. Lions around the world apparently were well aware too. Not long after Maria hit, Lions began offering financial gifts to LCIF in the name of Puerto Rico, knowing critical funding was a sure way to help what was bound to be a daunting recovery.

When Lions in Puerto Rico finally made contact with Byrd and her team of specialists eager to facilitate the grant process, transferring the US\$100,000 proved easier said than done. *"So much on the island was in ruins. We had to wait until a bank where Lions could receive the funds reopened for business,"* Byrd says. *"Then they had to find stores where they could buy life-saving and -sustaining supplies. The same thing happened at gas stations where they had to wait for hours just to fill up their tanks. They would clear one obstacle and another waited for them around the corner."*



The Day After

When the sun came up the morning after Hurricane Maria forever changed Puerto Rico, District Governor Félix Camacho Ayala was awestruck by the fire-scorched look of his beloved native land. “Everything seemed dead,” he says. Indeed. Mornings that had once echoed with birdsong were now cathedral quiet. At night, the chirping chorus of coqui frogs, an emblem of Puerto Rico, was absent.

After two days, he got a call from Miriam Vázquez. She had already been to the emergency command center at the San Juan convention center, where she met with representatives from the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA). “While at the convention center, I learned the outpouring of support for Puerto Rico was immediate. But I also became aware that the distribution network was at a near-standstill, as where and to whom supplies should go was unclear.”



With funds from the LCIF emergency grant having arrived, Vázquez called Puerto Rico’s three Lions Clubs district governors — Ayala in the east, Emilio Colón Rodríguez in the central mountains and Cristino Hernández on the west coast — to organize the shipment of supplies for regional distribution. *“I told my Lions that supplies were coming,” Ayala says. “It was time to put some sweat into our vests.”*

Making Progress

At the end of each day, Ayala would return to his own home and watch at night as lights came on in new parts of the city. They were signs of progress, yet dark swaths of the city still without electricity reminded him there was much work yet to be done. From September to December 2017, Hurricane Maria inflicted more than US\$91.61 billion in damage and caused 2,098 fatalities. Sadly, the number of deaths climbed to 2,975 by the end of February 2018. For the Lions of Puerto Rico, these figures struck close to home.

Two weeks after the storm subsided, Vázquez's daughter Maria went into labor but experienced severe hemorrhaging. The baby, a boy named Juaquin, would spend his first six weeks of life in intensive care. Maria, however, couldn't be saved.

Lions traveled from across the island to attend Maria's memorial service in San Juan. The church was filled to standing room only.

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Maria was a Lion,” Vázquez says, “and people told me stories about how she'd helped them. It was part of her character to put the community before herself. It made me feel good to at least know I had raised her right.

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The best way Vázquez could think of to honor Maria was to channel her grief into community service as a Lion and raise her country from the rubble.

One Year Later



A year later, more than 300,000 natives of Puerto Rico have left the island. Some families live in one room, unable to pay to rebuild the rest of their homes. Many must now live with relatives. And yet, the resilience of those put to the test during this powerful hurricane is evident.

They continue to help others even while still struggling themselves. Lions, passionate about what they do, rose to the occasion as others in need reached out for help. There's still much work to be done. And there are still Lions serving Puerto Rico residents in need.

Lions of Multiple District 51 continue to identify areas in which people are still struggling and to seek partners that can help victims of Hurricane Maria rebuild their lives. Puerto Rico residents, like their country, are beautiful, friendly and warm. LCIF looks forward to brighter tomorrows for them as we continue our work of giving and dedication to helping others.

Hope for the Future



lCIF.org/BE100



Visit lCIF.org/BE100 to learn how Campaign 100 deeply engage in disaster relief efforts and in preparing for, and responding to, natural disasters whenever and wherever they strike.

To support the compassionate works of Lions around the world, donate to LCIF's Disaster Relief Fund today.

Donate today!



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