

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Extraordinary Communication Methods Employed After U.S. Virgin Islands Hurricanes

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As the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and its federal and territorial partners are working hard to restore hurricane-battered communications systems on the U.S. Virgin Islands, the agency recently announced. FEMA says its taking extraordinary steps to ensure survivors receive accurate and timely information on how to stay safe, get basic needs met and start to recover from the storms.

Called into action in only the most extreme circumstances, the Department of Defense's Civil Authorities Information Support Element (CAISE) is helping recovery agencies get vital information to survivors who lack electricity to power TVs and radios and functioning cell towers to communicate by phone.

Arriving with equipment mounted on heavy trucks, more than 50 CAISE personnel went to work in St. Thomas and St. John shortly after Hurricane Irma wiped out traditional means of communications on those islands. Using old-fashioned methods such as loudspeaker broadcasts and paper handouts – and some not-so-old methods such as mass text messages to cell phones – they were able to reach thousands of survivors.

After a brief pause while Hurricane Maria tore through the islands, the teams sprang back into action. Since arriving CAISE has broadcast dozens of messages via loudspeaker and disseminated more than 26,000 mass text messages – informing survivors about such things as registering with FEMA, locations where water, food and other supplies are being distributed, where to find Wi-Fi hotspots, and how to stay safe and protect their families.

Moreover, these fully equipped teams have also conducted assessments and made repairs to local radio stations, helping to restore some island communications for the long term.

“The CAISE teams have helped all of us make the best of a very dire situation by reaching many people who otherwise would have heard very little about response and recovery efforts on their own,” said FEMA’s Federal Coordinating Officer William Vogel. “As work to restore the islands’ traditional communications systems continues, CAISE messaging has helped fill what could have been an information void.”