

The Virgin Islands Consortium

A Full Report Of FEMA's Efforts In The U.S. Virgin Islands So Far

Disaster Recovery / **Published On October 20, 2017 10:14 AM /**

Staff **October 20, 2017**



ST. CROIX -- U.S. Virgin Islanders were making progress facing the devastation of Hurricane Irma when, just two weeks later, a second Category 5 storm pummeled the territory. In the weeks since Hurricane Maria finished the job that Irma started, a massive and united effort is underway to help island communities and survivors put their lives back together.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is coordinating the federal response effort, working with the territorial government, federal and local partners as well as the private sector and voluntary organizations to help restore essential services to the islands and meet survivors' recovery needs.

Since hurricanes Irma and Maria struck in September, important milestones have been achieved. Roads are getting cleared of storm-related debris, commercial airline flights are coming and going, seaports are active, grocery stores and restaurants have opened, financial assistance for critical needs is getting to survivors and many children have returned to school.

“We are making significant progress in some areas, but we have a long road ahead,” said FEMA’s Federal Coordinating Officer William Vogel. “We will be here for as long as it takes to help the Virgin Islands and its people come back stronger.”

Some students have already resumed the 2017-2018 school year. To date, 10 schools have reopened in the St. Thomas/St. John School District and more than 2,800 students and 271 teachers have returned to the classroom. Additional schools are scheduled to reopen in St. Croix in the coming days to ensure the school year isn’t lost.

Federal partners are working to support Gov. Kenneth Mapp’s priority of getting schools reopened across the territory. To support the governor’s school resumption initiative USACE has installed 28 generators at schools and is working with the territorial Department of Education to assess options to provide classroom space for students at damaged schools. These options may include durable tent-like structures or modular units. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) personnel have helped the U.S. Virgin Islands Department of Planning and Natural Resources (DPNRP) and Department of Health (DOH) assess potential environmental dangers and water quality at the schools while local workers from the community assisted with the cleanup effort.

At the St. Croix Educational Complex, Danish Emergency Management Agency personnel helped get the facility ready for students by cleaning up, removing damaged ceiling tiles and repairing parts of the roof.

Debris removal from Virgin Island roadways and neighborhoods has resulted in supermarkets, gas stations and other stores restocking their shelves and reopening for business. Federal, territorial, local and private sector partners have worked around the clock to help restore functionality to the islands’ supply chain that was severely disrupted by port closures and the debris-littered roadways.

Boosted by \$11.2 million in expedited assistance from FEMA for debris removal costs, the Virgin Islands has cleared 75,000 cubic yards of storm-related debris, and the territorial government is moving ahead with its residential debris collection effort. This is the first step in removing the estimated 1.1 million cubic yards of debris left in the wake of the two hurricanes. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) is on the ground, working with the territorial government on debris clearance and on management strategies to clear the piles of debris.

The Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority (WAPA) continues to work jointly with the Virgin Islands Waste Management Authority and the Department of Public Works on a clean-up initiative across the territory.

A massive effort is underway to restore power throughout the territory. The importance of having a regular source of power for survivors has been a top priority of the Virgin Islands government since the monster storms knocked out power to the

islands.

With \$24 million in expedited FEMA grants, WAPA is moving ahead with the emergency repair of transmission and distribution lines in St. Croix, St. Thomas and St. John. Although the percentage of customers on the grid fluctuates as work progresses day by day, WAPA is forging ahead to meet its goal of having 90 percent of the territory's power restored by Christmas.

The power authority is shipping in power lines and poles as well as 500 linemen from across the United States. When all are in place – 250 have already arrived – these workers will have increased the local capability tenfold. This is ten times the amount of WAPA workers in the territory prior to the hurricanes.

At a recent news conference Gov. Mapp said he has asked USACE to assess the territory's entire power generation system, to include the cost of burying lines, saying, "We are going to work towards a more resilient power production and distribution system."

With cellphones a mainstay of communications across the islands, the restoration of cell services is another priority in the Virgin Islands. FEMA and federal partners continue to work with the private sector in support of territorial efforts to restore cellular communications. Meanwhile, local telecommunications provider Viya has established nearly 25 Wi-Fi hot spots throughout the islands, giving survivors and responders a vital communications resource.

A whole community effort is in full force to maintain medical care and public health support for survivors across the territory. Hundreds of healthcare professionals from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and Department of Defense (DOD) have supported and augmented local medical staff who were working steady 12-hour shifts in the weeks since the hurricanes. Many continued to care for patients despite damage to their own homes and the need to evacuate their families.

What's more, the three major hospitals throughout the territory were battered by severe winds and flooding. In response, the military's 575th and 602nd Area Support Medical Companies (ASMC) established mobile medical units outside of St. Croix's Gov. Juan Luis Hospital and Medical Center as well as St. Thomas's Schneider Medical Center to offer backup support for patients needing medical care.

Personnel from the National Disaster Medical System (NDMS), part of HHS, provided medical care at St. John's Myra Keating Smith Clinic before relocating to the Morris F. deCastro Clinic. NDMS staff also provided basic medical services at the fire station in Coral Bay, St. John. HHS and DOD workers provided basic healthcare services, such as triage and emergency medicine.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is also contributing to the effort to ensure ongoing patient care. It will be setting up interim soft-walled durable structures or modular units at damaged hospitals on all the islands and at DOH facilities. These units can expand to capacity and allow additional space for surgery and post-op patient recovery. Among its many efforts on behalf of Virgin Islanders, DOH is providing recurring walk-in clinical services from a mobile medical van. The health department is also providing infant-

toddler kits, prescription medicine and family planning services.

HHS and DOD continue to evacuate patients who need critical care. So far, more than 300 patients with critical care needs have been evacuated to the mainland for additional medical attention. HHS and DOD are following up with medical centers and local organizations in Atlanta and Columbia, S.C. for their care.

Because flooding offers a breeding ground for mosquitoes spreading waterborne viruses, staff from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have been working with DOH on vector control issues. U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps personnel have performed environmental health assessments at shelters, childcare, healthcare and educational facilities.

CDC is also supporting DOH in getting health and safety information to communities about post-hurricane risks. Health advice focuses on promoting mental health in the storms' aftermath, staying safe while cleaning mold?, preventing carbon monoxide poisoning and more.

Staff from across the federal family have been out in the communities. FEMA's Disaster Survivor Assistance (DSA) and Disability Integration teams have been fanning out across the islands for weeks, meeting survivors in their communities, helping them register for assistance and providing answers to their questions. DSA personnel have met with more than 13,000 people and registered nearly 7,000 for FEMA assistance.

FEMA recovery specialists are also at four Disaster Recovery Centers in St. Croix and St. Thomas to help residents face to face with information and questions about their registration. So far, the centers have logged more than 2,300 visits – and additional recovery centers are opening soon on all three islands. Representatives from the U.S. Small Business Administration are also at the centers providing information about low-interest disaster loans to individual survivors, as well as businesses, to repair or rebuild their homes.

Even with the logistical and communications challenges survivors have faced since the storms, more than 26,000 individuals and families have registered with FEMA for assistance under the two disaster declarations for hurricanes Irma and Maria.

Because of the severe challenges on the islands, FEMA has activated its Critical Needs Assistance program, which gets emergency funding into the hands of survivors as quickly as possible to take care of urgent needs, such as food, medical care and transportation. So far, nearly \$2.5 million is going to survivors for critical needs. This is in addition to repair grants or housing assistance they may receive.

More than 50 FEMA housing inspectors are visiting neighborhoods across the territory to verify hurricane damage as an important step in getting more assistance to survivors. With nearly 2,700 home inspections now complete FEMA has authorized more than \$1.4 million in survivor housing assistance. Word is also spreading about SBA low-interest disaster loans as well. So far, survivors have been approved \$4.6 million in disaster loans to repair and rebuild their homes.

As USVI residents begin to rebuild, USACE is supporting their efforts by doing temporary roof repairs through its Operation Blue Roof program. USACE has received more than

4,106 requests for assistance and covered 893 homes and facilities with the blue plastic reinforced sheeting. USACE has established centers on St. Croix, St. John and St. Thomas for survivors to learn about the program and sign up for assistance.

Every disaster recovery mission poses unique challenges. When local communities and residents must deal with back-to-back catastrophic hurricanes across three separate islands – amid ongoing dangerous storms and flooding – the challenges to recovery mount considerably. FEMA is committed to working with the U.S. Virgin Islands government, survivors and partners across the whole community to help restore and rebuild these communities.

Feature Image Credit: [*Irene Ali Photography.*](#)

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