

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Hebrew Congregation Of St. Thomas Holds Hurricane Relief Distribution Drive

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“Can you cook at home?” “Do you have clean drinking water?” These were just a few needs that the Hebrew Congregation of St. Thomas were able to help with at a distribution drive held on Thursday, Nov. 16, at the University of the Virgin Islands’ Wellness Center on the St. Thomas Campus, UVI announced Thursday.

Batteries, portable stoves, portable fans, water coolers, solar showers, and water filtration systems were just a few of the items donated to hundreds of UVI employees. Dr. Marilyn Braithwaite –Hall, wife of UVI President David Hall, learned of the congregation’s donation efforts in the territory and called to advocate for UVI employees.

"I am thrilled beyond measure to see this turnout, which goes to show how great the need still is," said Dr. Braithwaite-Hall. "People really need to know that we have needs here beyond the destruction of the buildings and the campus. People are devoting their lives to keeping the University alive and having this place be moving forward for our students. For weeks now, we have been back in classes."

Congregation volunteers and UVI staffers also distributed pampers, medical supplies, cat food, dog food, personal hygiene products, sun screen, and baby food. "We extend our sincere gratitude to the Hebrew Congregation of St. Thomas for their generosity and support for UVI employees during this time of recovery," said Dr. Wendy Coram Violet, director of the Center for Spirituality and Professionalism at UVI. "Many thanks to President Hall and the University's leadership for addressing the needs of many impacted employees."

"First and foremost we want to be here to help everyone," said Rabbi Michael Feshbach, of the Hebrew Congregation of St. Thomas.

The congregation has participated in several distribution drives since Hurricanes Irma and Maria struck the islands. Rabbi Feshbach has received support from synagogues from all around the United States, Canada, South America; the Israeli Government and the Jewish Federation of North America. Individual donors have also made donations as well.

"We are a historic synagogue," he said adding that the synagogue has been an integral part of this community since the 1790's. "Were the oldest synagogue in continuous use under the American flag and the second oldest synagogue in the western hemisphere." For that reason, people visit the synagogue while on island. Rabbi Feshbach said that when people heard about the hurricanes, they reached out and asked what was needed.

"We have said it is not just for individual members of our synagogue, but the needs are for the whole community," he said.

While the synagogue itself received minor though real damage, the Hebrew Congregation has been working with their partners to distribute donations in the territory.

"We have been lucky enough to have donations coming in on a steady basis," said Agnes Rampino, who has been leading the hurricane relief effort on behalf of the Hebrew Congregation of St. Thomas. "We have been trying to help people with distribution that aren't able to distribute the stuff but they have it to give."

"I am thrilled and it's a powerful show of community partnership, that we are all in this together and I am so really grateful for our partners and our faith community and others," Dr. Braithwaite-Hall said.

The University developed an Employee Wellness and Support Survey to assess the needs of its employees after the devastation of Hurricanes Irma and Maria. President Hall hosted an employee town hall meeting in November 2017 in response to the survey's findings, and with his cabinet, developed a strategy to assist employees. Today's distribution grew out of the University's desire to support its employees. Liza Margolis, senior coordinator of donor relations and special events at UVI and a member of the congregation, was instrumental in making this distribution drive possible.

