

The Virgin Islands Consortium

A Territory Forever Changed: Hurricane Irma One Year Later

Disaster Recovery / **Published On September 06, 2018 09:29 AM /**

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If you spent September 6, 2017 in the U.S. Virgin Islands, chances are the night of said date is hard to forget. For days the Mapp administration, citing weather reports, had projected that Hurricane Irma would impact the St. Thomas-St. John District, though it would pass more to the north. But as the storm drew closer, its distance to the district shrank, and just before noon on that fateful Wednesday, the deadly hurricane slammed the two islands at Category 5 speeds, exacting some of its worst devastation before walloping neighboring British Virgin Islands.

On the same day, most of St. Croix was quiet. There was some wind, but it hardly rained, and residents of The Big Island, as its called, waited impatiently in shelters and their

homes for the storm to pass to learn how the sister islands fared.

The storm pounded St. Thomas and St. John for hours, wreaking havoc on all corners. Roofs were blown off, buildings completely destroyed, homes flooded and some residents even lost their lives. It was a nightmare, but St. Croix residents, though anxious to find out what was happening, were in the dark because communication was interrupted.

Then, during the evening time, information about the storm's impact started trickling in. Below, some excerpts from our story published the night of Wednesday, September 6, 2017, titled ["Irma Wreaks Havoc In St. Thomas"](#):

"Hurricane Irma, hours after exacting catastrophic damage on [St. Martin and Anguilla](#), made its way to St. Thomas during the late morning time of Wednesday, commencing what would be hours of pounding with lots of rain and hurricane-force winds, leaving many parts of the second largest of the U.S. Virgin Islands in shambles, with dozens of persons reporting destroyed roofs, flooding, collapsed homes and more."

"The Schneider Regional Medical Center's (S.R.M.C.) roof was destroyed, according to a trusted government source, who was not sanctioned to speak officially. The government's Emergency Operation Command, a group recently created to lead Hurricane Irma emergency response, said the hospital relocated all patients from the third and fourth floors to the second floor due to flooding caused by roof damage."

"Samuel Topp, Government House's deputy communications director, told The Consortium Wednesday night that the entire hospital had been compromised. "One hospital official described the hospital as representing catastrophic failure," Mr. Topp said. He said planning and logistics were underway to evacuate the patient population at Schneider Hospital to a United States Military ship. "That has not been finalized and that is being contemplated as we speak," Mr. Topp said."

The above paragraphs only gave a glimpse of what had happened. On The Consortium's Facebook platform, [a post we published stating that we had heard of some devastation in St. Thomas](#), and that residents in the district affected should tell their stories so that first responders could attempt rescue efforts, generated hundreds of comments, many of them heartbreaking.

"I need help for my mom after storm passes. She is in Wintberg, house is in bad shape, windows and doors gone, she is in a closet. Glass and water everywhere. I need help to get her out of there once this is over please. I need to get her somewhere dry, she is 1-22 Wintberg, St. Thomas USVI. she is 83 years old....her roof is gone, just a pile of rubble," read one comment.

That's one of countless. In fact, the responses were overwhelming both in number and emotional stress, as many of the stories told were heart-wrenching.

Once the storm had passed, it became clear that St. John was hit even harder than St. Thomas.

Federal emergency response, already stationed in the territory, went into overdrive. Helicopters were transporting S.R.M.C. patients to St. Croix for safety, and soldiers from

around the U.S. were on the ground participating in a number of capacities. Cruise vessels turned into rescue ships, transporting thousands of residents and stranded tourists to the U.S. mainland. Governor Kenneth Mapp commenced daily press briefings to address stressed-out residents looking for information.

St. Croix residents, moved with compassion after witnessing the devastation to St. Thomas and St. John, went into overdrive to aid their fellowmen. Boats of goods, including canned foods, water, ice and generators, were being sent to St. Thomas. This continued until another Category 5 storm struck St. Croix two weeks later, but that's a story for September 19.

One year later, a lot of progress has been made, but the U.S. Virgin Islands, in many ways, has been forever changed.

On the positive side, power is 100 percent restored. Helplessness and fear have given way to job opportunities made possible through the construction industry and other sectors boosted by recovery efforts. The federal government is pouring billions of dollars into the local economy through strong and consistent lobbying from the Mapp administration, and school, for the first time since the storms, [opened on Tuesday](#) for normal session.

On the negative, many residents continue to complain about a number of federal programs that they say have failed to adequately address their needs. Among them the SBA loan program and the Emergency Home Repairs Program, which even Governor Mapp have complained about.

And one year later, [the territory is still under a state of emergency](#), a declaration that has been consistently renewed by Governor Kenneth Mapp.

As for the territory's tourism product, its main industry, recovery is taking time. More than 50 percent of hotels remain closed, according to Department of Tourism Commissioner Beverly Nicholson-Doty, [speaking during an August 2018 budget hearing](#). She said St. Thomas's air capacity sat at 10,000 weekly, half of what it was one year ago. And though the cruise industry recovered quicker because of its movable assets, according to the commissioner, the territory was already experiencing a steep decline in cruise visits before Hurricanes Irma and Maria.

The Mapp administration is hosting thanksgiving and praise services territory-wide to commemorate the one-year anniversary of the storms. The first event will be held on Sunday in St. Thomas at the UVI Sports and Fitness Center from 2:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. On St. Croix, it will be held at the St. Croix Educational Complex auditorium on September 23 from 2:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m., and on St. John, the thanksgiving and praise event takes place September 30 at the Franklin Powell Park from 2:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. All the events will be carried live on The Consortium's [Facebook platform](#) and on our website.