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Op-Ed: Three Years After Irma & Maria: Recovery Pushes Forward

Opinion / **Published On September 24, 2020 08:53 AM /**

Staff Consortium **September 24, 2020**

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William Vogel, FEMA Federal Coordinating Officer By. FEMA

The 2017 hurricane season was one of the most challenging missions in FEMA's 40-year history. In less than three weeks hurricanes Irma and Maria would leave trails of devastation across the entire territory and we would be in the midst of a massive joint response to meet survivors' immediate emergency and medical needs.

More than 2,500 federal staff were on the ground supporting 24-hour operations for 41 consecutive days. Throughout the massive response operations FEMA mission assigned dozens of federal agencies, resulting in 242 mission assignments, and nearly \$410 million in total obligated dollars. These mission assignments supported medical evacuations, delivery of critical equipment, and restoration of communications, power, and water services.

In total FEMA has obligated \$2.3 billion to the territory and nearly 250 dedicated FEMA personnel, remain focused on rebuilding a stronger Virgin Islands. Over the past year, through FEMA's Public Assistance Program, more than \$600 million has been obligated to support the restoration and recovery of 500 projects, including:

- \$69 million to fund the demolition and replacement of residential buildings at the Tutu Hi-Rise housing community on St. Thomas.
- \$10.5 million for architectural and engineering work for the replacement of Gov. Juan F. Luis Hospital on St. Croix.
- \$9 million to the V.I. Department of Health to fund the architecture and engineering services necessary to reconstruct the Charles Harwood Medical Center on St. Croix.
- \$13 million to the V.I. Water and Power Authority for electrical distribution repairs.

With \$69 million in FEMA Hazard Mitigation Program funding, these projects will not only address hurricane-related damage, they are part of a much bigger picture of ensuring resilient infrastructure in place to better withstand future storms.

- \$7 million to the St. John Community Foundation to retrofit 97 homes on the island against hurricane-force wind, debris, rain and other related hazards.
- \$4.9 million in funding to retrofit Fortuna/Bordeaux Fire Station, removing the modular buildings and upgrading the station's structure and functionality to ensure continuity of operations during an emergency. The retrofit will include safe room construction and the installation of a back-up generator.
- \$1.1 million for Phase I of the Department of Public Works Gallows Bay Drainage Improvements project on St. Croix.

Every disaster recovery poses unique challenges but when local communities and residents must deal with back-to-back catastrophic hurricanes across four separate islands – amid ongoing dangerous storms and flooding – the challenges to recovery mount considerably.

Since the hurricane-force winds subsided, the strength, creativity and resiliency of the Virgin Islands has been a source of inspiration for all of us. Together we have made substantial headway in many areas, but there is still much to be done. Working together and in coordination with Governor Bryan and the Office of Disaster Recovery, we will achieve our objectives efficiently and transparently for the well-being of the Territory.

Once again, our daily lives and the field of emergency management have been transformed within a matter of weeks as we battle the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. During this outbreak the recovery team has transformed how we work, day-by-day or even minute-by-minute to meet our mission.

There are long days behind us, and many more ahead. We recognize that even after three years the challenges continue, but we continue to work tirelessly to achieve the reconstruction of a stronger Virgin Islands. We cannot thank you enough for patience and determination and perseverance to overcome.

Submitted by FEMA on Wednesday on behalf of Bill Vogel, FEMA Federal Coordinating Officer

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