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FEMA Details Response to Hurricane Irma on Five-Year Anniversary, Talks Preparedness Plans For Future Storms

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A home on St. John destroyed by Hurricane Irma in 2017. By. ERNICE GILBERT/ V.I. CONSORTIUM

Hurricane Irma struck St. Thomas on Sept. 6, 2017, leaving devastation so vast that the U.S. Virgin Islands is still trying to gain its footing following the deadly Cat. 5 storm's impact in the St. Thomas-St. John District.

On Wednesday, the Federal Emergency Management Agency issued a release detailing its response to the storm and the agency's plans for future weather events. See below.

Hurricane Irma's winds of more than 150 mph, along with bands of wind-driven rain, severely damaged the power grids on St. Thomas and St. John. The storm blew away roofs from hundreds of homes and damaged other critical services, including medical facilities and schools.

FEMA pre-positioned personnel to the U.S. Virgin Islands to support the territory's response operations. There were 43 federal personnel deployed and 15 responders from the Defense Coordinating Element deployed to the territory September 2, 2017 – four days before Irma made landfall on St. Thomas and St. John on September 6, 2017.

On September 3, 2017, the Region 2 Incident Management Assistance Team deployed to St. Croix and an Initial Operating Facility was established to respond to Irma in partnership with the Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency (VITEMA).

FEMA, the Department of Defense (DoD), other federal partners and VITEMA leveraged numerous resources to support the territory's response to Irma. In the days after the storm swept through St. John and St. Thomas:

- *For the first time, FEMA disseminated more than 26,000 mass texts and deployed the DoD Civil Authorities Information Support Element to broadcast dozens of messages over loudspeakers.*
- *FEMA supplied more than 582,000 meals and 380,000 liters of water to survivors.*
- *The USS Kearsarge and its supporting ships, the USS Oak Hill and USS Wasp, deployed to the Caribbean; the Wasp, along with helicopter support, surveyed damage and performed patient transfers from St. John and St. Thomas to a functional medical facility on St. Croix.*
- - *Crews spent a total of 98 hours in the air evacuating 126 survivors, transferring 160 federal employees, and transporting 4,850 pounds of equipment and supplies.*
 - *FEMA's Individuals and Households Program registration period began September 7, 2017; FEMA approved \$31.4 million to survivors on St. Thomas and \$9.4 million to survivors on St. John.*

FEMA also provided other assistance to eligible survivors such as direct and financial assistance. Direct assistance included permanent housing construction – repairs, and financial assistance included rental assistance and home repair. FEMA Hazard Mitigation specialists provided free advice on how to protect their homes and make them more resilient to future disasters through multiple outreach events.

A whole community response

The response to Irma was a whole community effort. Community groups, philanthropic organizations and Virgin Islanders stepped up to muck and gut homes of debris and mold, repair homes, feed survivors and inform people on how they could receive help.

Five years after Irma made landfall on St. John, organizations such as Love City Strong, a St. John nonprofit organization dedicated to disaster preparedness and response, continue to support initiatives, and create a culture of resilience.

“Since 2017, Love City Strong has been committed to increasing disaster preparedness and response capacity on St. John. That mission has evolved over the years to include recovery and mitigation projects, all of which continue to place an emphasis on community resilience,” said Love City Strong Executive Director Meaghan Enright.

Love City Strong continues to work on home repairs, through privately–and federally-funded programs and offers project management support for federally-funded projects. Its disaster preparedness work includes all hazards preparedness outreach in St. John and partnering with FEMA and VITEMA to support pre-staging and logistical efforts. Love City Strong helps expand capacity in the event of a disaster and provides annual training to its immediate staff and surge capacity contractors to ensure the community is keeping their response skills sharp.

Preparing for the future

In January, federal and territorial partners began to coordinate this year's Readiness Initiative, which culminated in weeklong hurricane response exercises in May, one month before the start of hurricane season. During the Readiness Initiative's Capstone, FEMA and other federal partners participated in a training exercise involving hurricane response simulations at the request of the Government of the U.S. Virgin Islands and VITEMA.

Response focus areas involved food and water distribution, patient movement, route clearance, debris removal, temporary power, and power restoration and more. The Capstone incorporated lessons learned from hurricanes Irma and Maria response, helped to identify gaps with territorial or local resources and identified federal resources required to respond to severe storms in the territory.

Further steps toward strengthening the territory include restoration of FEMA's bunker on St. Thomas, an initial operating facility for response, the expansion of storage capabilities of shelf-stable meals and boxed water on St. Thomas and St. John to support initial response and repairing the storm-damaged tsunami warning system on St. Thomas, St. John and Water Island.

FEMA said it remains committed to helping Virgin Islanders recover not only from hurricanes Irma and Maria but will continue to support the territory in developing resilience against future disasters.