

# A Personal View: Preparation and Aftermath of Two Category 5 Hurricanes

Miriam Vazquez

Who could have guessed, or even imagined, that 15 days after Hurricane Irma, a Category Five hurricane with 155 mph winds hit Puerto Rico as the most dangerous hurricane to hit the region, that a second hurricane, **also** Category Five, with winds of over 200 mph, would follow the same path? Hurricane Maria is regarded today as the worst natural disaster on record in Puerto Rico and Dominica. The impact of these two hurricanes took a toll on the lives, structures and functions of the islands which are not resolved these many months later.

There was a brief interval of time to get prepared for imminent danger as the hurricane's path was going right through the middle of the island. Puerto Rico is 100 miles by 35 miles, with close to 3.7 million population and a high percentage of elderly residents.

To secure the Lions Eye Bank in Puerto Rico, with the help of all the employees, we boarded up, moved items to a safer location at the Institute of Forensic Medicine and abandoned the facility. Employees were informed I would contact them as soon as it was possible to return after the hurricane had passed. They were to stay home until notified through text, a phone call or WhatsApp.

When Hurricane Irma approached Puerto Rico, we concentrated on personal concerns; taking care of our houses, boarding up windows and doors, removing loose furniture and belongings, and preparing for the worst. We purchased the basic needs: food, water, lanterns, radios, blankets, coolers, gas, cash, etc. Everyone was assigned items from a list we made for the family; my daughter Marie (who was pregnant, almost to full term), my niece Lymari and everyone.

We prepared to weather Hurricane Maria in much the same way as for Hurricane Irma. In addition, we started getting things to help the children from Hurricane Irma who were being brought in from the Leeward Islands. As part of the Sabana Llana Lions Club, we purchased \$400 in clothing, towels, baby bottles, diapers, etc. and delivered them to the

Verdanza Hotel in Isla Verde for the evacuees.

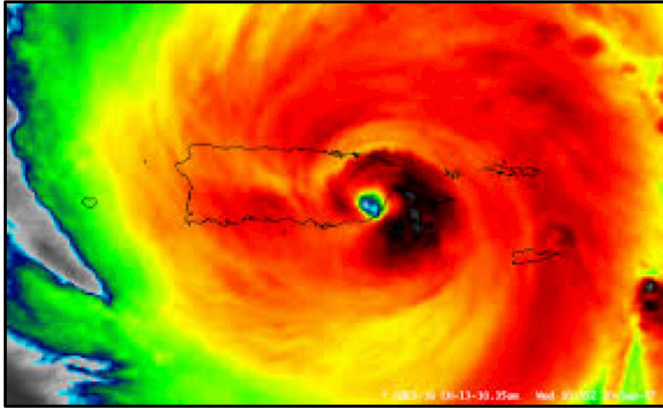
Hurricane Maria was projected to hit Puerto Rico on September 20, 2017, and it was a different story from Irma - this was a major catastrophic hurricane, with winds above 185 miles per hour. Since my daughter Marie could deliver at any moment, we moved to her house to help and to be in communication in case the power and telephone lines went down which, of course, they did.

To purchase what we needed we had to use cash, as ATM's were already empty. There was very little food at the grocery store and a lot of panic. We filled up all the cars with a full tank of gas and waited for Hurricane Maria to hit. The Lions Eye Bank remained closed and elective surgeries were not a consideration, as everyone's focus had to be on personal safety and survival.

We cooked the food we already had in the refrigerator for dinner, and placed other food in sealed containers, then brewed enough coffee for the long night ahead. We sent everyone to take a shower while we still had water (if the power is down, the condo has no way to pump the water to the apartments). We removed any items that could become flying objects from the wall, balcony and interior rooms. We took out table games to keep the tension down with the kids and charged all mobile phones, and lanterns, etc. We thought we were ready for the hurricane, except we only found one bottle of propane gas, so cooking had to be minimal until more gas was available.

We started feeling the first effects of Hurricane Maria, with countless things flying left and right in the wind, power lines going down, traffic lights crashing, trees falling everywhere, and cars moved across the parking lot by the wind. The howling of the hurricane sounded like a woman in rage; this went on for 30 hours. We wanted to sleep but no one could rest with all the tension.

All of a sudden, the power went out; we were in the dark, no phone, mobile phones and no water. We waited for the storm to pass, hoping we could get the power restored



**Hurricane Maria – Category 5** hitting the whole island of Puerto Rico, Municipal islands of Vieques, Culebra and the U.S. Virgin Islands including St. Croix where we have Lions Club in the city of Frederiksted.

and mobile phones functioning, but no carriers were up and running. We turned on a battery powered radio and there were no stations online except one. This was the only way to know what was happening out there.

All the 78 municipalities of Puerto Rico were severely affected; landfall occurred at the southeastern part of the island, affecting all towns especially Maunabo, Yabucoa and Humacao, which received the direct hit of more than 170 mph winds. Many Lions Clubs facilities had severe damages to their structures.

When Hurricane Maria finally passed, we decided to go to the Lions Eye Bank of Puerto Rico before checking on our home. Everything was down and there was no way to get through - passage was impossible. We were all desperately trying to make our phones work, all cellular towers were down or gone, so communication was gone for the moment. When we finally got signal, three days after the Hurricane, it was for short time periods and dependent on where you were at the time.

Driving, when even possible, was scary and dangerous; roads were like a maze with so much debris, especially hanging power lines and poles in the middle of the road. I walked to get to the Lions Eye Bank because there was a huge tree down that would not allow any traffic on either side of the road. When I arrived, I found the building was still standing. The Lions Eye Bank was structurally in good condition because we had covered windows, locked down air conditioners and anything else on the roof. However, there was no power, water or phones, but that was of minimal concern compared to other areas. There was still a building, but no ability to restore function with utilities and communication.

Personally at home, I lost my terrace and suffered a lot of flooding inside the house; my kitchen cabinets were ruined and the roof was leaking in different areas in the living and dining room. But we were all alive and together as a family.

There was no power or water throughout the island and people were waiting in long lines of over eight hours trying to find water, gas, and food. ATMs were still not functioning so cash was limited to what was acquired before the storm.

Since the first event (Hurricane Irma), the municipality government, state government and several non-profit organizations including Lions Clubs International joined efforts to supply food and personal hygiene items. FEMA served first claims for about 12 municipalities that were declared disaster areas including Adjuntas, Canóvanas, Carolina, Guaynabo, Juncos, Loíza, Luquillo, Orocovis, Patillas, Utuado, Vieques and Culebra.

The Lions Clubs of Puerto Rico established a center to collect food and personal items that were distributed to several refugee centers in Loíza, Canóvanas, Luquillo, Vieques and Culebra.

PCC Miriam Vazquez submitted a request for a Lions Club International Foundation “Major Catastrophe Fund” grant through Wesley Gathings, the Regional Programs Specialist Humanitarian Program Division at Lions Clubs International which was approved on September 26, 2017 by LCIF Chairperson, PIP Bob Corlew for \$100,000.

- Prepared surveys by Clubs and FEMA Centers to gather information to identify:
  - Priority communities to assist
  - Number of people affected per sector or community and what kind of articles or materials were required.
  - Amount of people required for distribution at each sector or community. Meeting to assign responsibility and municipality/sector to be assigned for distribution of food and materials.
  - Prepared a basic list of families, cost of goods and request quotation to different stores or warehouses.
  - Purchase items and prepare basic need package per family vs vouchers to buy such as stove from a specific list.
  - Recordkeeping of original receipts and bank statements.

During the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, Past District Governor Bernardo Perez and I, as the Past Council Chairman, were coordinating, serving and helping our communities cleaning debris, serving meal packs to the different towns and coordinating with Federal and Inter-Agency Committees lead by FEMA and the Puerto Rico and U.S. government.

We met every day at 6 am and 6 pm to sum up the day's events and request assistance for the areas we found that were not being served. Today we continue to serve those in need because there are still, after 5 months, towns without power.

On October 10, 2017, we were still without power when my daughter went to the hospital to have her baby. We waited all night for news, but heard no answer since phone lines were working only at certain times and in specific areas. At 5 am I called my son in law; he answered about 6 am with a text that I should call him because he was not able to connect with my phone. I found an area to call and he told me the baby was born safely, but my daughter was hemorrhaging and had been taken to the operating room.

She was sedated and put on a respirator; after that there was just one code blue after another. The doctor came in and said she was given 17 pints of blood and plasma, and she was still bleeding. Later they told us her organs were shutting down; at about 4 pm, she was gone. The personal devastation, added to the hurricane's trauma, has been all but overwhelming.

From the Eye Bank perspective, the we are back in our own facility as of January 2018 with electricity. Restoration of power came about through negotiation with the power line workers as well as the Power Authority. It was the line workers who were the most moved to get us back in ser-

vice. In September no doctors were operating due to the limitations of generator power; many doctors did not want to operate while it was necessary to depend only on generator power. In October, there were 3 transplants; all these patients were due to emergencies, as surgery was still dependent on generators. Total corneal transplants from September through December was 27. Approval from insurance plans was suspended as pre-approval was waved due to extensive damage to insurance carriers' buildings and the fact that their employees were not able to return to work.

Today the eye bank is functional but with limitations. There are some intermittent power outages but the generator is working. We had to purchase a "hotspot" to have access to the internet. Still today the hurricane has affected people who have losses of loved ones, property, basic necessities, and employment. Personally and professionally, we are united to restore Puerto Rico and will strive for a better tomorrow for ourselves and our children. This too is the spirit of the Lions Eye Bank.

This long-term disaster emphasizes the need for more extensive disaster planning than might previously have been anticipated. We typically plan for short term power or equipment outages, or maybe for events that last a few days or weeks, but not for something that impacts our lives and our ability to work and deliver the health care functions of our eye bank for months. The networking and support of our fellow eye banks and the coordination through EBAA have been invaluable and greatly appreciated. Now with the ability to look back at these events, we would recommend that all banks look at what is included in disaster planning for their facility and try to plan for the even more unexpected events. Sharing our experiences, networking with our policies and procedures, and supporting the necessary functions of our banks is a strength of our eye banking community.