

Puerto Rico's Forgotten Island Vieques Needs Help

Press Release - FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

ViequesLove – Operation 18 Degrees North

September 23, 2017

In the very early morning hours of September 20, 2017, the eyewall of Hurricane Maria passed over the tiny island of Vieques, Puerto Rico as a Category 5 hurricane, before moving westwards to mainland Puerto Rico. Maria ravaged the 60-square mile island with sustained winds of over 150 MPH and storm surges of over 12 feet, destroying homes, local businesses and causing widespread devastation. The island lost electricity, water, and the ability to communicate with the rest of the world outside of a few Satellite phones across the island.

With the devastation in Texas, Florida, the Virgin Islands and now mainland Puerto Rico, Vieques, with its community of 9,000 American citizens are left with little to no access to the disaster relief supplies and personnel that FEMA, the National Guard, the Coast Guard and other relief organizations typically provide. Cries of help are being received almost hourly from the limited satellite phone communication, all saying the same thing: "Help. We need water. We need food. We need help."

In many cases, this is status quo for Vieques; Puerto Rico's forgotten island. When Hurricane Hugo struck Puerto Rico in 1989, it was only because the US Navy used Vieques as a bombing range and base of operations, that the island was able to get back on its feet. Support from mainland Puerto Rico and the United States was limited for weeks after the storm. However, unlike in 1989, Vieques does not have the US Navy deployed on the ground, and as such is facing a dire situation.

But one thing that Vieques *does* have in spades is an overwhelming sense of community. A group of past and current residents, who were off-island at the time of the storm, have rallied together to provide the relief that Vieques has not otherwise received from typical sources. Within a day after the storm, ViequesLove, a non-profit established under the COREFI umbrella, a 501c3 out of Puerto Rico, launched "Operation 18 Degrees North" to bring support to the island. To date, ViequesLove has raised nearly \$100,000 dollars through social media networks and they continue to do everything they can to promote cash donation to purchase much need supplies and provide transportation to and from the island.

Using a combination of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and good old-fashioned networking, ViequesLove and others in the community are leveraging every contact they have to mount a large-scale relief operation. At this point, there is an established plan to get boots on the ground and provide communication equipment to key personnel on Vieques, as well as to the hospitals and emergency outposts. Once communication is established, plans are in place to start bringing in large quantities of food, water, generators, communication equipment, and other disaster relief supplies, while also evacuating as many at-risk citizens of Vieques as possible.

Despite the impressive grassroots effort that has been mounted so far, there is still so much work to be done. The people of Vieques are in great need and they are becoming desperate. Food and water scarcity is a major issue, and there are reports of looting and violence, which is only expected to get worse. Fuel is unavailable and drastically hampering the ability to mount search and rescue operations in the barrios, where major damage occurred. People are not able to easily get off the island, and getting relief access to the island is being hampered by difficulties with the state of mainland Puerto Rico. A terrible situation is quickly turning catastrophic, as each day passes and relief cannot be provided to the island.

As of now, there are no casualties that have been reported on Vieques due to the storm. Please help us keep this impressive statistic true. We are looking for a call to action to bring FEMA forces, the National Guard, and any other relief organization, outside of ViequesLove's grassroots campaign to Vieques. We ask that you call your senators, your congressmen and women and your media outlets, as well as post on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram about Vieques to drive awareness and resources to the island. Everything little bit helps. In addition, we ask for your continued financial support, so we can bring all necessary aid to the people of Vieques. Donations to ViequesLove are being accepted through GoFundMe, at <http://www.gofundme.com/viequeslove>.



Thank you to everyone who supported Vieques thus far.

For any questions, please contact Brittany Roush at [804-938-7270](tel:804-938-7270) or Brittany.roush@gmail.com