

Penn State students lend a hand in Puerto Rico relief efforts

BY ALEXIS COLLINS | FOR THE UNDERGROUND ON OCTOBER 2, 2017

Eleven days after Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico, millions of residents still remain without electricity, and many have limited access to gas, cash, and clean drinking water. In addition, 16 people died as a result of the category 4 storm.

The US territory's top official said Saturday that much more work needs to be done to meet Puerto Rico's critical humanitarian needs.

While many private organizations, local US governments, and nonprofits lend a helping hand in hurricane relief efforts, a group of Puerto Rican students here at Penn State is leading the initiative to help the battered island as well.

Two Penn State organizations, The Puerto Rican Students Association (PRSA) and the Boricua Grads, are combining efforts to assist the US Commonwealth by providing monetary funds, water, non-perishable food, and other essential supplies.

The clubs have created a [Gofundme page](#) to raise money for the island, with the proceeds going to "Unidos por Puerto Rico," a public-private initiative started by First Lady Beatriz Isabel Rosello and a group of companies to help hurricane victims.

As of today, the campaign raised \$156,299 of a \$150,000 goal. The response was huge, with almost 3,000 people mobilizing donation funds in 11 days. PRSA Vice President, Waldemar Rivera, and Boricua Grads President, Yolian Amaro-Rivera could not be more proud.

"It's a great amount that we can send back home," Rivera said. "That money's just going towards infrastructure, helping people get their houses back, and trying to get everything [hurricane victims] can have like human rights, food, and necessities."

Including Penn State, the Gofundme page is sponsored by 83 universities in the United States that consist of Puerto Rican students. "We are working together to spread the message and trying to get funds so we can send them home to help," Amaro-Rivera explained.

The two groups collected items that were critical to the victims Friday and drove them to Reading, Pennsylvania on Saturday. The donations were then shipped and will be delivered to the southeast region of the island. That area was one of the most affected because it was where the storm initially hit, according to Rivera and Amaro-Rivera.

“Donating is our way of helping the cause,” Rivera said. “We as Puerto Ricans being outside our island, we want to help those in need back home, so we decided to join forces.”

Besides mobilizing efforts to provide aid to Puerto Rico, the two club representatives also said that their organization wants to educate and promote Puerto Rican culture to Penn State students. The PRSA, which began in the 1970s, is comprised of undergraduate students. “We want to get more involved,” Rivera, a junior and chemistry major said. “[We want to show] students how our culture is, how we do things, and how we celebrate.”

Meanwhile, Amaro-Rivera, who is a 5th year Ph.D. candidate in electrical engineering, said that the Boricua Grads are relatively new compared to the PRSA. The club was started in 2006 by a small group of Puerto Rican graduate students. Amaro-Rivera stated that the group’s mission is to mentor new grad students and make the transition process into program smoother. “Grad school is already difficult, especially the first two years,” she said. “So the transition is a really complicated process.”

Rivera and Amaro-Rivera, who both hail from Puerto Rico, believe that the federal government isn’t doing enough to assist in relief efforts. “I feel like they should have just been there by the first day we were hit by the hurricane,” Rivera said.

He then compared the level of aid provided to Puerto Rico, to the aid given to Houston and Florida after hurricanes Harvey and Irma. “They were there [on] the first day helping each other... I feel like the United States could do more on how to help Puerto Rico, but I guess it is what it is.” Amaro- Rivera agreed. “They are certainly helping, but in my opinion, it’s not enough,” she said. President Donald Trump is expected to visit the island this Tuesday.

The clubs are organizing more campaigns and fundraisers on campus in an effort to raise additional funds for hurricane victims in Puerto Rico. The two leaders expressed their desire to get more of the campus community involved.

“We want [the events] to not just be for Puerto Rican students, we want it to be something for the Penn State community,” Rivera explained. “We want ‘Penn State’s helping Puerto Rico’ not just the ‘Puerto Rican students from Penn State.’”

So far, the PRSA and the Boricua Grads have garnered tremendous support from other PSU clubs and organizations, from the Latin-American Association to the Caribbean Association.

In addition to raising funds and spreading awareness, some Penn State departments are using their offices as drop-off locations for food and supplies. “It just feels nice having that support from other people, it means a lot” Rivera said.

Rivera and Amaro-Rivera are adamant about assisting their homeland. “Once we’re Puerto Ricans we’re always going to be Puerto Rican,” Rivera stated. “We’re always going to be by our people even though we’re not actually there.”

Amaro-Rivera also expressed her desire to help. “All of our families are there,” she said. “Even though we are here studying, we are Puerto Ricans and basically people that can help them right now [are] the Puerto Ricans who are not living in the island because the ones living in the island are the ones who are suffering.”

The duo hope to garner more aid and support from not only from other Puerto Ricans but from fellow Americans as well. “Even though we speak Spanish, [and] have different cultures... we are still Americans,” Rivera stated.

If you want to help the PRSA and Boricua Grads in their donation efforts, visit their [page Penn State Helps Puerto Rico on Facebook](#).