

Progress Update on Hurricanes Irma and Maria in the U.S. Virgin Islands

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ST. CROIX, Virgin Islands – After Hurricane Irma devastated much of St. Thomas and St. John three months ago, St. Croix became a base of operations for first responders, who began life-saving and life-sustaining missions to support survivors. But within two weeks, fierce winds and torrential rains from Hurricane Maria struck St. Croix, devastating even more infrastructure and services. Hurricane Maria caused further complications to the response for emergency workers and residents across the territory.

Considering the significant challenges of two back-to-back Category 5 hurricanes, residents are now seeing visible signs of recovery. Work crews are on the roads installing new power poles, grocery stores and restaurants are open, children are back in school, debris is being cleared and home repairs are underway.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) remains actively engaged in coordinating the federal response effort and working with the territorial government, federal and local partners, the private sector, and voluntary organizations to help restore services to the islands and meet community recovery needs.

“We have many days of significant progress behind us and we continue to make substantial headway in several areas, though we still have a long road ahead,” said FEMA Federal Coordinating Officer William Vogel. “We remain committed to helping Virgin Islanders rebuild and come back even stronger.”



Since the hurricanes struck in September, several important milestones have been achieved. So far, more than \$244 million in federal recovery dollars have been approved for the territory, including grants for individuals and families and emergency repair work for roads, power and debris.

Working together with the local government and whole community partners, progress has been made on several fronts (amounts are as of December 6).

Nearly 50 percent of all customers on the islands now have power. For several days after the hurricanes Virgin Islanders had almost no power throughout the territory. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) installed over 170 generators in critical facilities, such as hospitals, water treatment facilities and schools. With nearly \$110 million in approved FEMA Public Assistance grants, the

Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority (WAPA) continues the emergency repair of transmission and distribution lines throughout the islands.

FEMA, along with the U.S. Department of Energy and other federal partners, have brought in power line cables, utility poles and more than 700 linemen from the mainland. The additional workers significantly increased WAPA's local repair capabilities, allowing it to add a greater number of customers to the power grid every day.

Debris removal has progressed steadily with FEMA funding more than \$21 million to help clear roads which paved the way for the transport of goods, supplies and services. Of the estimated 851,000 cubic yards of storm-related debris left by the hurricanes, more than 332,000 cubic yards have been collected from the territory so far.

Cell service site restoration is now more than 75 percent throughout the islands. The hurricanes disrupted landline telephones, internet connections and cellular



services; all were severely degraded. In some island areas communications services were nonexistent.

In cooperation with the Virgin Islands Public Service Commission, a Hurricane Integration Team (HIT) was established to coordinate with federal partners, the private sector and the territory to restore wireless and landline services.

FEMA set up fixed and mobile communications equipment to establish voice and data connectivity from satellite systems. Local telecommunications providers established Wi-Fi hotspots throughout the territory to offer free internet access via laptops, cell phones, tablets and other devices. This initial restoration of services allowed survivors to contact family and friends during the immediate aftermath of the disasters.

Housing assistance totaling more than \$34 million in grants is flowing to survivors and home repairs have begun. FEMA housing inspectors have completed more than 26,000 inspections, or nearly 94 percent of the total. Housing inspectors continue to visit neighborhoods across the territory to verify hurricane damage, an important step in getting assistance to survivors.

In addition to housing grants to repair and rebuild homes, nearly \$15 million in rental assistance has been dispersed to survivors. The U.S. Small Businesses Administration approved more than \$100 million in disaster assistance loans, with over \$89 million for homeowners and more than \$10 million for business owners to repair and rebuild.

USACE is wrapping up temporary roof repairs made under the Operation Blue Roof program, having installed nearly 3,600 fiber-reinforced plastic roofs to protect homes from the elements until permanent repairs can be made.

FEMA is working with the territorial government to address specific housing needs for the unique housing challenges here in the territory and will be reaching out to individual survivors to discuss their options.



Disaster Recovery Centers (DRCs) and Disaster Survivor Assistance (DSA) teams continue working directly with survivors to help them register by the December 18 deadline. DSA personnel have registered more than 11,000 survivors for FEMA Individual Assistance. Nine DRCs have received more than 34,000 visits on all three islands. The DRCs remain open from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Saturday.

Students are back in school. The powerful winds and torrential rain of the storms forced territorial authorities to condemn six schools in St. Croix and two in St. Thomas. Several others were damaged. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency worked with the Virgin Islands Department of Planning and Natural Resources to sample the drinking water at some of the damaged schools before reopening to the public. Many of the schools are currently operating with emergency generators installed by USACE.

Vital healthcare services are being restored throughout the territory. FEMA and its federal partners continue to work closely with the Virgin Islands Department of Health (DOH) to provide necessary services and health information to the community. After the hurricanes severely damaged medical facilities on the islands, more than 400 survivors requiring care were evacuated to several mainland states. Contract services to provide medical evacuation support as needed continue, while the

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and USACE coordinate efforts with the territorial government to plan for the installation of temporary medical facilities allowing for continuous patient care while repair and rebuilding efforts begin.



USACE continues to provide emergency power to medical facilities and is de-installing generators as more facilities are added back to the power grid. In the meantime, FEMA and HHS are working together with the Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency and DOH to plan for the return of medically evacuated residents from the mainland where they continue to receive quality care. DOH also distributed thousands of donated infant and toddler kits, including formula, diapers and baby wipes, to single mothers and families in every district in the territory, as well as hundreds of doses of insulin and coolers.

FEMA's Disability Integration team coordinated with the voluntary organization Friends of Disabled Adults and Children (FODAC) to provide hundreds of donated durable medical goods, such as wheelchairs, walkers, nebulizers and hearing aids to the elderly and those with disability needs. The teams continue delivering medical equipment throughout the territory.

FEMA and the federal family will continue working with the U.S. Virgin Islands government, survivors, and local partners across the territory for as long as it takes to help rebuild and restore island communities.

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Disaster recovery assistance is available without regard to race, color, religion, nationality, sex, age, disability, English proficiency or economic status. If you or someone you know has been discriminated against, call FEMA toll-free at 800-621-3362 (voice, 711/VRS - Video Relay Service) (TTY: 800-462-7585). Multilingual operators are available (press 2 for Spanish).

FEMA's mission is to support our citizens and first responders to ensure that as a nation we work together to build, sustain, and improve our capability to prepare for, protect against, respond to, recover from, and mitigate all hazards.



Following major disasters, the U. S. Small Business Administration (SBA) is the primary source of Federal funds for long-term recovery assistance. This assistance is in the form of low-interest loans and is available to non-farm businesses of all sizes, private nonprofit organizations, as well as homeowners and renters with property damaged by the disaster.

For official information on the recovery effort following the hurricanes, please visit www.informusvi.com or www.usviupdate.com. Follow us on social media at twitter.com/femaregion2 and www.facebook.com/FEMAUSVirginIslands.

To donate or volunteer, contact the voluntary or charitable organization of your choice through the National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (NVOAD) at www.nvoad.org. For those who wish to help, cash donations offer voluntary agencies the most flexibility in obtaining the most-needed resources and pumps money into the local economy to help businesses recover. The Community Foundation of the Virgin Islands also has the “Fund for the Virgin Islands” at www.USVIrecovery.org.

