

National VOAD and Other Voluntary Organizations Play Critical Role in Housing Cleanup

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SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico – Dozens of National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD) member organizations, in addition to many other volunteer agencies, are present in Puerto Rico providing essential services for those affected by Hurricane Maria. Together with Puerto Rico VOAD members, volunteers are working closely with local communities to perform housing cleanup and debris removal in addition to providing food, shelter, water, and medical services.

VOAD Organizations such as Scientology Volunteer Ministers, Habitat for Humanity, Team Rubicon, Southern Baptist Disaster Relief, among other non-VOAD agencies such as Warfighter Disaster Response Team, SBP, and AmeriCorps, are on the island clearing downed trees, power washing homes, and removing debris and interior mold from private property.

The **Scientology Volunteer Ministers** are traveling the island with seven chainsaws, removing trees from yards and houses. The team of 15 volunteers expects to expand to about 60 and is actively training locals to assist with the cleanup efforts. The work the ministers perform is based on need. For example, the ministers were on their way to another site and came across a house with a large fallen tree on the roof. Neighbors told the volunteers that the family left for a shelter because they were afraid the tree would cause the house to collapse.

Without hesitation, the ministers began to cut and remove the tree with chainsaws, and within 30 minutes, the roof was clear.

Habitat for Humanity, with the help of local staff, is evaluating the damage to homes on the island to determine a long-term recovery plan. As part of its initial response, Habitat for Humanity is preparing and providing 2,000 shelter repair kits containing supplies and tools to help families make preliminary home repairs to improve their shelter conditions. The kits include items such as a five-gallon



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bucket, contractor-grade tarp, and a handsaw.

Team Rubicon, a military veteran organization, is providing essential services and assisting with house and property cleanup. Team Rubicon is distributing medical supplies, conducting community needs assessments, removing debris, and deploying chainsaw teams to assist residents of Puerto Rico. To date, their teams have removed over 2.5 kilometers of debris.

Southern Baptist Disaster Relief volunteers are working to clear debris, chainsaw downed trees, and clean mud out of flooded homes.

Warfighter Disaster Response Team, a group comprised of Afghanistan and Iraq combat Veterans and Fire/Rescue team members, is on the west coast of the island distributing food and water, performing wellness checks, and helping clear debris.

SBP, whose goal is to shrink the time between disaster and recovery, arrived in Puerto Rico along with AmeriCorps members in mid-October. The group is initially working with the **Salvation Army** to distribute food and water across the island. SBP's goal is long-term recovery, and they are working with community leaders to determine future home cleanup locations. SBP will focus construction efforts on populations most in need, including low income households, veterans, and seniors. Once SBP begins rebuilding efforts, they will focus on a resilient housing design and will share their model with local organizations to increase rebuilding capacity.

AmeriCorps is performing debris clearing and chainsaw work, removing limbs and fallen trees from houses to allow the United States Army Corps of Engineers to install temporary roofing associated with Operation Blue Roof. AmeriCorps often arrives after the community has started cleanup efforts and helps perform work citizens cannot easily complete alone, such as chainsaw work.

Most organizations collaborate with local communities to perform housing cleanup efforts. VOADs typically meet with municipality leadership to determine cleanup locations and priorities. Contact your local municipality to learn more about the location of VOADs in your community.



National VOAD is an association of organizations that mitigate and alleviate the impact of disasters, provides a forum promoting cooperation, communication, coordination and collaboration; and fosters more effective delivery of services to communities affected by disaster. National VOAD includes over 50 national faith-based and community-based organizations and 65 state/territory organizations. Puerto Rico VOAD includes 32 organizations. For more information on National VOAD and its member organizations, or if interested in volunteering or donating, visit <https://www.nvoad.org/howtohelp/>.

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The SBA is the federal government's primary source of money for the long-term rebuilding of disaster-damaged property. SBA helps businesses of all sizes, private non-profit organizations, homeowners and renters, which can cover the cost of replacing lost or disaster-damaged real estate and personal property. These disaster loans cover losses not fully compensated by insurance or other recoveries and do not duplicate benefits of other agencies or organizations.

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