Long-Term Recovery Groups Are Still Active in the U.S. Virgin Islands

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ST. CROIX, U.S. Virgin Islands -- Soon after hurricanes Irma and Maria swept through the territory in 2017, members of local community groups, faith-based, community-based organizations and nongovernmental organizations collaborated to establish long-term recovery groups on St. Croix, St. John and St. Thomas. Long-term recovery groups are responsible for helping address unmet needs of eligible disaster survivors after they have maximized state and federal funds available to them.

Long-term recovery groups typically include federal partners, voluntary agencies and grassroots organizations that work in close coordination to address community needs, distribute resources and help restore vital support systems – health, social, economic and environmental systems, among others.

FEMA Voluntary Agency Liaisons (VALs) help establish long-term recovery groups after disasters and provide a wide range of technical assistance to state, local, tribal and territorial partners. In USVI, long-term recovery groups led community engagement and advocated for resources including technical support, disaster case management and outreach events, by providing preparedness information to Virgin Islanders to build resilience.

In particular, the St. Croix Long Term Recovery Group is a cooperative body that is made up of representatives from faith-based, nonprofit, government and private sector organizations to assist individuals and families in Hurricane Maria recovery. The St. Croix Long Term Recovery Group's goal is to identify community needs and match resources to address those needs to ensure the most vulnerable populations can recover from the disaster.

Taking a hands-on approach to home repairs was a common thread among the long-term recovery groups across the territory. FEMA provided more than $370,000 to cover invitational travel costs to more than 400 volunteers who supported the territory. On St. Croix, volunteers use more than $125,000 in

building materials from Lutheran Disaster Response and the St. Croix Long Term Recovery Group and contributed 25,000 hours to survivor home repair.

Naomi Thomas, a FEMA VAL during the initial recovery after the 2017 hurricanes, recalls the joy she felt during the last nail ceremony to mark the end of repair job to a disaster survivor's home. As the homeowner hammered in the last nail. "Watching the faces of homeowners enter their newly repaired homes is a very rewarding experience," said Thomas, who now works with Public Assistance.

On St. John, Love City Strong continues to work on home repairs, through both privately funded programs, as well as offering project management support for federally funded recovery projects. Its disaster preparedness work includes all hazards preparedness support on St. John, as well as supply pre-staging and logistics in partnership with FEMA and VITEMA. Love City Strong maintains supportive response capacity in the event of a disaster and provides annual training to its staff to ensure the community is maintaining relevant response skills.

Five years later, USVI long-term recovery groups are going strong. FEMA and its community partners continue to provide disaster preparedness workshops across the territory. The long-term recovery groups on St. John and St. Croix have taken recovery a step further and have established their own Community Organizations Active in Disaster, commonly referred to as COADs in the emergency management field.

Delia Richardson, Executive Director for Community Engagement for the St. Croix Long Term Recovery Group, and Aaron VanDoren, U.S. Virgin Islands FEMA Integration Team lead, engage with the audience in May 2022 during a disaster preparedness event at First Assembly of God on St. Croix. Submitted Photo