**One Year Lookback on the Puerto Rico Hurricane Recovery Efforts Transcript**

**Mark Peterson:** I'm Mark Peterson, and this is the FEMA podcast. A year ago, Hurricanes Irma and Maria devastated Puerto Rico, and since that time, FEMA, and numerous federal partners and the government of Puerto Rico have undertaken one of the largest post disaster reconstruction and humanitarian efforts in U.S. history. Major portions of the island’s infrastructure are being rebuilt as federal agencies support the government of Puerto Rico's plan to restore the islands lifeline systems, and enable Puerto Rico to withstand the storms to come. Never before has FEMA coordinated federal resources to rebuild an entire Commonwealth with a population of three point 3 million people. Seventy eight municipalities, electrical, water and telecommunication systems, seaports, airports, schools, healthcare systems, roads and bridges. Overall, in 2017, hurricanes, Irma, Maria, and other disasters affected nearly 47 million people throughout the United States. While recovery continues, FEMA and its interagency partners remain focused and dedicated to continued stabilization and resilience of impacted communities. Mike Byrne, one of FEMA’s most qualified federal coordinating officers deployed soon after Maria's landfall in Puerto Rico to help lead the coordination of the federal government support. On this episode we spoke with Mike Byrne about his experience over the last year and how he sees the status of recovery in Puerto Rico one year after Hurricane Maria made landfall.

So Mike set the stage for me about when you arrived in Puerto Rico, what were the conditions like?

**Mike Byrne:** Well, when I arrived, you know, things were pretty chaotic in that there was so much incoming, so the everywhere in the island was damaged. Uh, communications were spotty at best even two weeks in. We had a dramatic relief efforts underway, but it was just so much incoming. We were, we were, uh, somewhat overwhelmed by what was happening. A good people, uh, they were doing the best they could and, but we needed to sort of evaluate what we were facing. And this is where I, I'd have to say, uh, you know, uh, uh, I encourage you all emergency manager be students of emergency management and there's a great work that the Kennedy School did call managing crisis and it's a series of case studies. But in a summary Chapter at the end, there's a particularly poignant, a set of information and that is the difference between a routine event and a crisis event.

Routines and events. You know, we have scripts with them. We've done, uh, many times, uh, we generally, you know, with some variation, you know, we were able to manage things. A, the best example I can think of is a heart attack, a heart attack. Victim falls on the ground, EMT shows up. You want the EMT to follow the rules. You don't want them to get creative on, on you. When it comes to something that's, that well documented that a successful outcome is achieved by doing these things. Then we moved to crisis. Crisis is things we don't have scripts for them. Crisis is things where we have to create new approaches. We have to be creative. And probably the most significant thing that we have to do in a crisis is we have to accept a high tolerance for error because we're not always going to get it right because we just have to take chances.

And that was the situation we found ourselves in Puerto Rico. There was just so much going on, so much need, so much, a widespread devastation that we had to take some challenges and some risk.

**Mark Peterson:** So we already have, we already had a presence on Puerto Rico before the storm took place. And then we also had IMAT staff there. Our incident management assistants, our FEMA’s First responders were already on the ground. And so you came in a little bit after the storm had hit and we already had a sense for some of the impacts and certainly we saw it on the news, uh, the, the, the effects of those impacts. What were some of the first challenges that you felt that you needed to address?

**Mike Byrne:** Well, I think we have to first and foremost, remember that this was the second storm. Irma hit Puerto Rico. Well not that bad, but their response mechanisms, the response organization Prima our team on the island, uh, you know, did, did a fine job managing, you know, the impacts of a, what was it, much smaller event.

But the other important thing to remember is that the U.S. Virgin Islands got hit really bad by Irma and all of the stockpile of a water and supplies and meals that we had, we sent to the Virgin Islands because that was where the greatest need was. We even sent generators and so not only was Puerto Rico, you know, just vulnerable because they had just gone to a smaller event, but they were also more vulnerable because our supplies and everything had been already used up by sending him to the VI. So there was a, there was a gap there that had to be overcome and that's where we got into the, you know, the tyranny of distance and the challenge of, you know, a thousand plus mile supply chain.

**Mark Peterson:** So Mike, you approached the disaster in Puerto Rico a little bit different than the way we normally approach disaster response and recovery. So tell me about that approach and why is it, why was it important to you to relook at the way that we conduct business?

**Mike Byrne:** I think it's reality of how far you are away you are and what the requirements were, uh, causes us to end the lack of like a sound footing and place a safe place. Uh, and the comparisons. I'll draw a few in north of I-10 for Katrina for the most part. You okay? If you're in north, the Westchester County and Sandy, you were okay. Uh, and you were able to get resources from multiple directions and to you here we had one way in. We had one port that was really operational. We had airlift capability, but even that, you know, it was limited and what we had to do is realize that we couldn't address everything that was coming at us. We had to kind of step back and say, hey, if we're going to get control of this, we have to start to stabilize portions of the island.

And what we did was we came up with what we ended up calling operation stabilization and it was, we stopped worrying about everything. Then we started worrying about five things, five critical things, you know, food, water, healthcare, a blue tarps and communications. Those were the things that we were going to focus on and make the all of the ability and capabilities we had all the resources we had were targeted for those five things. And to make it even more direct, we said we're only going to do that, those five things in six places and we took the six major metropolitan areas of concentrations of people on the island and we said we're going to stabilize those areas first for these five critical things so that we could then grow out from those areas and take care of the rest of the island.

**Mark Peterson:** I wonder if you could give me some perspective, uh, comparing a disaster. Maybe have the similar magnitude on CONUS versus Puerto Rico.

**Mike Byrne:** Wow. Did you have to think five to seven days ahead of, you know, like it's in fact the example that one of our colleagues, Jeff Byard use it. It's working in Puerto Rico, you know, because of the mountainous terrain and everything that I've heard a lot of fact. I had a lot of members of Congress that when we flew around and they said, wow, this looks a lot like West Virginia, and so we said, yeah, but imagine West Virginia hit with a storm like this flooded like this, and then when all the resources that were coming to West Virginia got to the border of West Virginia, they had to stop and wait five days before you could put them to use. That's the reality is if we had an idea or something that we needed, we had to think about it five to seven days ahead of time or else or else we weren't planning correctly.

We weren't being honest with ourselves and honest with the people of Puerto Rico as to what we were going to be able to provide.

**Mark Peterson:** So if you were to give me a sense of one year later, September 20th, a year from landfall, where are we now in the recovery in Puerto Rico?

**Mike Byard:** You know, we're, we're in a thread, a fragile but stable place and I think it's a good place given the amount of damage I saw. Give me a man of, uh, of effort that w that's been expended from, from all parts, from Puerto Rican government, Puerto Rican citizens. So let me just say something about them. Unbelievably resilient, unbelievably, you know, uh, you know, put a happy side on everything in terms of, uh, you know, being willing to put up with the kinds of risks that they had, the tragedies that they saw and they still worked out. And how do I know that because we've hired, I have now have about 1700 Puerto Ricans on my staff and it's about 70 percent of my workforce. And they, even when they didn't have power, they came to work every day. They got there early, they stayed late and they gave it everything they got. I, I just, uh, totally blown away and impressed by their resilience and their commitment to their island and to their neighbors. I guess as far as the way forward, uh, the a great thing, uh, Congress mandated us that we had to write a plan. The government had to write a plan and we were in. FEMA was supposed to help them and we did. We brought in some of the best minds, the best think tanks in the U.S. and elsewhere to look at this problem set and come up with a plan. We now have that plan as the Volga state.

That plan became public. To me, that is the beacon. That's the directional guidance that we've got for the solutions that we want to, uh, attack. And, and that's probably something different here. We're doing it to, uh, what's happened over the overtime is a FEMA’s work has become commoditized. You know, now the commodity that business that we're in is PWs. We write project worksheets, we do HMGP grants or hazard Mitigation Grant Program grants. And, and what we've kind of gotten away from is what the right solution is. You know, I, I worked for Microsoft for a number of years. I never committed to somebody and said, hey, I wanna sell you to sequal servers as a bit talk and a windows interface. I never said that. What I said was, hey, what's your communication? You're an IT problem. Let's talk about how I can help you solve that.

Now at the end of the day, did I sell them a couple of sql servers and a biztalk? Yeah, we, that's what they bought, but it was all about the solution and that's the direction that we have going in Puerto Rico because we've divided our operation into sectors, critical infrastructure, sectors, community service sectors. We're working to find what's the right thing to do before we try to figure out what the rights solution is, what the, what the right resource that needs to be applied it. So we're looking at is FEMA’s role in this is more our contribution to the solution and not have it be the whole solution as we, as we, I think are prone to do when we think about our PWs our our hazard mitigation grants. Now let's look at the whole list, look at the problem holistically and say, all right, for power, we've got to rebuild the grid and we have to do it in a designed way that where there's less vulnerability. Okay. FEMA, what can you bring to the table? What we can bring are grants, we can bring this and hazard mitigation. We bring these 406 six mitigation things to it and to come out with the, a better well rounded coordinated recovery.

**Mark Peterson:** Mike, you led the National IMAT team. You've responded to really significant, uh, emergencies in the nation's history, not just with FEMA, but, uh, also in your time before FEMA 9/11 and Hurricane Sandy for a couple of examples. What has surprised you about this disaster over the last year?

**Mike Byrne:** Just the relentlessness of it. It just didn't give up. It just, uh, there were challenges everywhere we turned and in ways where you'd like it, like there's an expression I didn't, couldn't catch a break. Right. And we couldn't catch a break there. And, and, and by we, I, I, whenever I said that I don't, we've developed an incredible strong partnership with the Commonwealth and with the leadership there, you know, we're in this together, there's no doubt about it. It was also an incredibly strong partnership with DoD. This is a, you know, I've, I've worked every disaster, I've worked, I've worked with a Department of Defense and with defense support for civil authorities, but this one was the one where it get exercised the most, uh, we really, uh, benefited, uh, couldn't ask for a better a colleague and partner and now friend because of what we've been through a General Buchanan, uh, we, we, we worked on things, we looked at the conditions that we found and we said what condition do we want to achieve? And then we poured our resources and together collaboratively to solve those problems.

**Mark Peterson:** The DoD is a great example of another federal agency that's coming to help us and I think there is a sense that it's not just FEMA but truly in this disaster, maybe more than others. It really isn't just FEMA. It's all the federal partners. Can you talk a little bit about some of the other federal partners and, and voluntary agencies?

**Mike Byrne:** Absolutely. Uh, I mean, believe it or not, you know, because now that I've mapped, we've mapped out in the plan where all the possible funding sources that come in from this 22 federal agencies that have some level of funding, I mean, you know, do they have billions of dollars? No, but in many cases they have hundreds of millions of dollars that they're going to be able to bring to this. So it's, again, it's what your contribution is, what are you going to bring to the table?

And it's not just the federal government as you as you suggested, it's the voluntary agencies. Another thing we've established for the first time ever is I have a group that is focused on interaction with Florida anthropy and to, you know, what the donor community wants to bring to the island because it's pretty significant what, how, how they want to play a role and how they want to come to the table. In fact, the best example I can think of is the water system in Puerto Rico is 97 percent process their water company. Now, prosser, who is an eligible applicant is our applicant. And you know, we're gonna do our routine business with them when it comes to the nonprofit wells, which ended up being the wells that are in the mountains in those remote communities. They're much more fragile, uh, are mostly nonprofits. Okay. We need somebody to cover the cost share.

We need somebody to help pull these nonprofits together. A donor has stepped up and has offered to pay the cost share for those nonprofit wells. That's the kind of integration when, because when you only look at it with your eyes, with the filter of FEMA, you, you don't see that full picture of possibility of what everyone else who wants to be there, wants to contribute, can bring to the table.

**Mark Peterson:** Mike this disaster like, uh, like other disasters around the country, when FEMA comes in to help with the recovery, we become part of the community. We really work with mayors, local officials. We hold town halls, we’re out there helping people with every, every mechanism that FEMA can bring to them. Maybe you can talk a little bit about the spirit of the island, the people and what you've experienced.

**Mike Byrne:** Well, God bless them, but they're trying to teach me salsa, you know, uh, and it's, uh, it's not pretty, but we're working on it.

Uh, the spirit of the island, you know, I guess one of my benefits, personal benefits is I grew up in an area of New York City called the East Harlem Spanish, or also known as Spanish Harlem. So the Puerto Rican culture was not unfamiliar to me. The music is infectious, you know, so, uh, and then the food is just amazing. Uh, and so it, it really, uh, the welcoming, you know, I, I've said to my wife many times that anytime you go out into a place where Puerto Ricans are, the tone of the place is laughter, you know, uh, people uh, know how to have a good time. Uh, they, they look on the bright side, uh, they, they take this stuff and what I mean to paint the picture that Pollyannaish and anyway, they understand the challenges that they faced and, and some of the dramatic loss that they suffered, you know, a lot of lives were lost and a lot of injuries.

But, uh, but just a resilient community, a community that I'm proud, I feel proud to be able to be there and help and I think the rest of our team does too. And one other thing is, like I mentioned earlier, uh, we're committed to, I'm committed to getting to 90 percent local Puerto Rican running the disaster response for FEMA, uh, by the one year anniversary. I don't know if I'll make it at this point, but we're gonna we're gonna make a hard drive for the next month or so to get there because they bring a level of expertise and sensitivity that you can't teach, you know, you can, you can appreciate it and you could try to emulate it, but they, uh, they've, they've been a tremendous end. The talent we're getting, uh, the engineers, uh, university of Mike was the University of Puerto Rico at Mike was fantastic engineering school. Uh, I've got a lot of lawyers on staff that are taking jobs that aren't lawyer jobs, but their ability to write, to communicate, to understand a complex problem is just really benefiting us. So it's, I'm excited about the, our ability now to end up with a body of labor and of people that are committed learning and feeling good about our profession of emergency management and I'm hoping that they stick with it because who knows when the next one's gonna hit and I'm sure their ability to speak Spanish, their experience with a catastrophic event likes Maria is going to just make them a great asset for, for the, for the community of emergency management. Not just FEMA.

**Mark Peterson:** We’ve linked to this episode on our FEMA Facebook page and we invite you to join the conversation in the comments. If you have ideas for a FEMA Podcast topic, send us an email at [fema-podcasts@fema.dhs.gov](mailto:fema-podcasts@fema.dhs.gov). If you would like to learn more about this episode or other topics, visit fema.gov/podcast