

U.S. Virgin Islands One-Year Milestones

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ST. CROIX, U.S. Virgin Islands – One year after two back-to-back Category 5 hurricanes devastated the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI), progress is being made in the territory's recovery. Homes are being repaired, schools are back in session, roads are free of debris, ports are open and composite utility poles are standing tall.

Since hurricanes Irma and Maria struck last September, Federal agencies have provided more than \$1.9 billion to the territory in FEMA grants, disaster loans by the U.S. Small Business Administration and claims payments by the National Flood Insurance Program. Working together with the local government and whole community partners, progress has been made on several fronts.

Power has been restored. After the storms damaged almost 90 percent of the territory's electrical grid, Virgin Islanders spent months in the dark. Boosted by more than \$940 million in FEMA funding, a coordinated effort by territorial and federal officials led to the restoration of service for 90 percent of eligible customers that could safely receive power, did so within 100 days. In March power was successfully restored to all eligible electric customers in the territory. At the height of the restoration, nearly 800 off-island electrical workers were in the territory restoring service.

The territory is working to improve the grid resilience for future events. This investment of nearly \$500 million, funded through the FEMA Public Assistance program, includes replacing wooden poles identified to support critical infrastructure with composite poles that can withstand winds of up to 200 mph on all three islands. Additionally, the USVI Water and Power Authority (WAPA), through the support of FEMA Hazard Mitigation funding, will begin a multi-year



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effort to place power lines underground resulting in a stronger power grid that is less susceptible to the impacts of severe weather; this will bring improved reliability with less power interruptions.

Communications have been restored. Getting vital information to survivors was a significant challenge after land line telephones, cell towers, cable service and internet access were wiped out.

Called into action in only the most extreme circumstances, the Department of Defense's Civil Authorities Information Support Element (CAISE) assisted recovery agencies during the response effort.

Shortly after Irma's landfall, more than 50 CAISE workers arrived with equipment mounted on heavy trucks. They used old-fashioned methods such as loudspeaker broadcasts and paper handouts, as well as mass text messages. The teams stayed through Hurricane Maria, broadcasting dozens of messages via loudspeaker and sending more than 26,000 texts informing survivors about topics like locations of supply distributions or Wi-Fi hotspots. In order to restore island communications for the long term, these teams also assessed damage and made repairs to local radio stations.

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. The team's purpose was to decrease overall restoration times for the public and aid in planning for the long term rebuilding of the networks. Working with local Virgin Islands' telecommunications provider Viya over 20 Wi-Fi hot spots were established throughout the islands, offering free internet access to laptops, cell phones, tablets and other devices so survivors could contact family and friends during the immediate aftermath of the hurricanes.



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Students have returned to school. The powerful winds and torrential rain of the storms damaged or destroyed 48 Virgin Islands Department of Education (VIDOE) properties across the territory. Through the FEMA Public Assistance program more than \$100 million has been provided for temporary school structures, including 245 modular units and 6 multi-purpose sprung structures. These temporary structures are designed to withstand 150 mph winds, and can be used for three to five years.

Critical supply infrastructure restored. Roads have been cleared of storm-related debris, commercial airline flights are coming and going, and seaports are once again active. Hurricanes Irma and Maria left behind nearly 600,000 cubic yards of debris in the USVI, enough to fill 177 Olympic size swimming pools. Boosted by \$99 million in assistance from FEMA for debris removal costs; all eligible debris has been collected and significant progress is being made toward the goal of shipping it away from the territory.

Supplemental medical equipment and services are assisting survivors. FEMA's Disability Integration team coordinated and partnered with the voluntary organization Friends of Disabled Adults and Children and the Pass It On Center, to provide hundreds of donated durable medical equipment and goods, such as: wheelchairs, walkers, nebulizers, shower supports, hospital beds and hearing aids to the elderly and those with access and functional needs. The teams delivered vital medical equipment throughout the territory to hundreds of survivors; helping them to regain independence. This initiative matched donors in the community with individual survivors with a specific need.

FEMA has also provided more than \$2.5 million for crisis counseling to assist survivors coping with the emotional impacts of the hurricanes aftermath. Additionally the Emergency Prescription Assistance Program was activated to provide a free 30-day replacement of certain prescription drugs and medical



supplies to survivors who do not have insurance. The program has served more than 3,200 survivors and provided over \$2.5 million in assistance.

Hazardous materials and derelict vessels removed from the territory. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) worked with local governments and citizens to keep hazardous materials out of the environment. EPA's Household Hazardous Waste collection operation was completed in February after more than 145,000 items of waste were collected and transported off-island for proper disposal.

A multi-agency effort, led by the U.S. Coast Guard, began to mitigate pollution and remove vessels displaced by the hurricanes. Under the direction of the U.S. Virgin Islands Department of Planning and Natural Resources, a total of 479 displaced vessels, 3,668 hazardous chemical containers were salvaged or recovered. A total of 12,449 gallons of fuel and oil waste were also recovered.

Although the recovery process is in full swing, there is more work to be done. The territory still faces many challenges.

Housing continues to be a challenge for many survivors. The catastrophic storms left most of the islands homes severely damaged or destroyed. FEMA has been working with the territory to provide short and long-term housing solutions to meet the individual needs of survivors

Housing assistance after a disaster can be challenging and for a territory that spans several islands with few housing resources, the challenges are multiplied. Less than one week after Hurricane Maria tore through the territory, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) completed the first of nearly 3,700 fiber-reinforced plastic roofs installations under their Operation Blue Roof program.



FEMA is utilizing various programs to support the housing needs of survivors in the territory to include rental and replacement assistance, temporary home repairs, direct leasing of housing, repairs to multi-family housing, and direct repairs through permanent housing construction. FEMA provided more than \$82 million to more than 20,000 households for housing and other needs assistance.

More than \$180 million in funding has been provided to the territory for the Emergency Home Repairs V.I. (EHRVI) program, which reimburses the territory for basic emergency repairs allowing Virgin Islanders to remain in their homes and communities while more permanent repairs are performed. The Virgin Islands Housing Finance Authority administers this program, receiving more than 10,000 applications and completed repairs to more than 4,800 storm-damaged homes.

Understanding the unique needs of the territory, FEMA is working hand-in-hand with local officials to identify thoughtful solutions and explore creative uses of our housing programs.

Vital healthcare services remain impacted. A whole community effort began following the storms to maintain medical care and public health support for survivors across the territory. Hundreds of healthcare professionals from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Department of Defense (DoD) supported and augmented local medical staff who were working steady 12-hour shifts in the weeks following the hurricanes. New dialysis treatment mobile units will be fully operational at Juan F. Luis Hospital and Medical Center in October 2018.

Due to extensive storm damage to healthcare facilities, it became necessary to transfer patients out of the territory. Nearly 800 people were evacuated under the HHS National Disaster Medical System patient movement program. Most of these



patients, along with family members and caregivers, have returned to the USVI. In April, licensed dialysis care returned to St. Croix and St. Thomas.

FEMA and HHS continue to assist the territory by transporting patients who need care in a mainland hospital, but do not have health insurance. Concurrently HHS and USACE are working to provide temporary medical facilities so that people don't have to travel to the mainland for treatment.

HHS led deployment of HHS experts from across the Department and facilitated the deployment of health department personnel from New York City, New Jersey, Washington, Delaware, and Mississippi to support USVI recovery. These deployments provided assistance to USVI officials to advance health and social services recovery through mitigating administrative barriers to recovery, behavioral health capacity building, strategic planning, and emergency healthcare delivery assessment projects.

HHS provided training for USVI officials on the emergency grant application process and development of internal fiscal monitoring controls, resulting in improved emergency fund access and management to advance health and social services recovery.

Although much has been done, FEMA continues to work with Federal, territorial and community partners to help the Virgin Islands fully recover, while strengthening the territory's resiliency for the future. "Over the past year, the strength, creativity and resiliency of the Virgin Islanders has been a source of inspiration for all of us," said FEMA's Federal Coordinating Officer Chris Hartnett. "Together we have made substantial headway in many areas, but there is still a lot of work to be done. FEMA is committed to remaining in the USVI to help the territory fully recover and rebuild even stronger."



The 2017 disaster season affected nearly 47 million people in the United States. While recovery continues, FEMA and its interagency partners remain focused and dedicated to the continued stabilization and resilience of impacted communities. As of July 25, 2018, FEMA and its Federal partners obligated \$22.9 billion dollars to support response and recovery from hurricanes Harvey, Irma, Maria, and the California wildfires. FEMA and its Federal partners have been making long term investments in the affected communities and will continue to focus on the progression of recovery for years to come.

The devastating hurricanes and wildfires of 2017 reminded the nation of the importance of preparing for disasters. Often, we will be the first ones in our communities to take action after a disaster strikes and before first responders arrive, so it is important to prepare in advance to help yourself and your community. [Disasters Happen. Prepare Now. Learn How.](#)

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