

Locals, Officials Band Together to Restore Power in San Sebastián

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SAN SEBASTIÁN, Puerto Rico – One community's grassroots response helped restore power well ahead of other municipalities that waited for help in the dark after Hurricane María.

Two months after María caused one of the worst blackouts in American history, San Sebastián, a community of more than 37,000 in northwestern Puerto Rico, still struggled without power. About 30 percent of its population were over age 60, many of them unable to physically get around.

Mayor Javier Jiménez Pérez reacted quickly, working with professionals in his community to get the lights and the life-saving equipment turned on.

"We couldn't take it anymore. There were lives at stake and we had to take action," he said.

The mayor's determination and willingness to act underscores the message in FEMA's initiative, "You are the Help until Help Arrives." Just one element of FEMA's disaster preparedness initiatives, the message advocates taking simple actions in an emergency until responders arrive. Those who are nearest to someone in need are best positioned to provide immediate care.

The mayor put himself in that position, knowing it would be some time before the community got its power back. He mobilized a task force and named it the Pepino Power Authority, or PPA, after the city's official name, San Sebastián de las Vegas del Pepino. He staffed it by reassigning 32 licensed electricians from the town's workforce. He lined up additional help from the Municipal Emergency and Disaster Management Office and welcomed volunteer retirees from Puerto Rico



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Energy Power Authority and other community members.

“PPA is the expression of the people facing the challenges after a disaster with the magnitude of María,” Jiménez said.

The Pepino Power Authority began to restore power in November 2017 only two months after Maria made landfall. The task force chopped down trees and thick brush, forging a path to access downed poles. The brigades salvaged spare parts for reuse. They tied cables together by hand and reattached them.

“The whole community was engaged,” said Carlos Lebrón Carrillo, a community leader. “Those who could not volunteer labor contributed with food or water.”

Residents and the Pepino Power Authority brigades worked tirelessly seven days a week. By Jan. 16, power was restored to 92 percent of San Sebastián. Puerto Rico’s seventh-largest city, with its brightly painted buildings and surrounding woodlands, became one of the first towns on the island to reclaim full power for its residents.

“In my 14 years in office, it has been one of the most beautiful experiences for me to see how the community banded together to take action,” said Jiménez. “It was a celebration with fireworks when the lights went on.”

Ultimately, the community’s willingness to be the help until help arrived changed the quality of life for all residents living in San Sebastián.

The Pepino Power Authority’s achievement led to new legislation in Puerto Rico. Law 107 empowers local governments to create their own power authorities during emergencies so they can restore critical services.



Go online to www.fema.gov/media-library/assets/images/173187 to see an electrical substation in San Sebastián.

For more information about FEMA's initiative "[You are the Help until Help Arrives,](http://community.fema.gov/until-help-arrives)" visit community.fema.gov/until-help-arrives.

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