The Disaster Relief Services Branch of the American Red Cross is responsible for many things, including providing aid to those in dire need. In Puerto Rico, this branch primarily deals with the aftermath of hurricane season. In this newsletter, we describe the roles of some key people, through interviews, in the department and give these experienced individuals a way to impart their knowledge for the benefit of volunteers and staff in the future.

After spending over a week volunteering with and getting to know the people in this department, it is evident to us not only the sense of community the citizens of Puerto Rico have for each other, but also the immense amount of compassion and a drive each and every one of them exhibits to help their fellow Puerto Ricans. The best part is that the people of this department do not act this way for recognition or for any kind of celebration— they are just truly these types of people. It has been an amazing and inspiring experience to work so closely with such selfless and kind hearted people.

-Rita Park, Montana State University
Valerie Velazquez

Valerie works within the Office of Preparedness as the Disaster Program Specialist. She helps the community prepare by having the supplies and materials that they need to be prepared for disasters of all kinds. Before Irma and Maria, many families only had supplies and a plan for about a few days following a disaster. After Maria, Valerie advises that families need to be prepared for at least 10 days, or even two weeks, following the disaster. Supplies, such as water, food, flashlights, batteries, medications, radios, tools, money, a map, etc. can help families directly after a disaster. Valerie also recommends that families have a plan in place before a disaster occurs to ensure there is a safe place to meet and a way to find each other in case of disrupted communication. Valerie’s work with the Red Cross has helped numerous families gather supplies and develop plans in case of another disaster.

Keyla Lopez

Keyla is from San Juan and has family all over the island. Keyla graduated in June 2017 with her degree in chemistry. After the hurricane she was looking for wifi when she found the Red Cross, and she immediately signed up as a volunteer. The most vital services she required were food, water, and comfort kits. Her role as a volunteer throughout the hurricane recovery efforts changed from driving cars to distributing supplies, and she now supervises the warehouse. Her focus now is on getting generators and supplies to communities, as well as teaching others how to prepare physically and mentally for the next hurricane season. Her advice to all new volunteers is that everything you do makes a differences, even (and especially) the people in the warehouse who are the superheroes behind the scenes.

Gilberto Gandia

Gilberto has lived in San Juan for his entire life. He has been helping people since 9th grade within emergency medical services, and later on as a paramedic. Right before Irma and Maria, he started working in Disaster Services and worked as an instructor training new volunteers. The first thing he did when the storm had passed was take care of himself and his family, then he turned to help his community. He says the most vital services that are needed after a disaster are power and communication. Without either of these, it makes working and coordinating efforts very difficult. With the next hurricane season arriving soon, Gilberto has been preparing his community and gathering volunteers. Keeping educated volunteers is one thing that would improve recovery on the island in the event of future disasters.
Mass Care

Mariano Soto

Mariano is a current volunteer that is originally from Buenos Aires and has made his home in Puerto Rico for nearly 13 years. His past occupation was a chef. After Hurricane Maria he helped to distribute nearly 78,000 water filters, 11,000 solar generators along with other supplies such as tents, food, and water. "Stick in there at the beginning (of a disaster), everything is a mess." Mariano advises to remain on site even though you may feel like you don’t have a role. after the immediate effects of the disaster. “Things are messy at first but they fall in place with time.” He is a strong believer that the Red Cross brings hope to the people of Puerto Rico.

Spiritual Care

Leonardo Lugo and Ally Broco

Leo and Ally live in Mayaguez, and together they work as a spiritual care team. They were inspired to volunteer for the Red Cross because of the quality of education provided and the wonderful level of spiritual care offered. When working within a disaster, Ally suggests that you must have a passion for helping others in need. She also suggested that you must be willing to listen to others. Ally is getting ready for the hurricane season by helping with pillow case talks and currently providing spiritual care within the whole island.

External Relations

Aslin Rodriguez

Aslin recently started working for the Red Cross after Hurricane Maria. She started as a volunteer who helped staff other volunteers. She now works as a recovery specialist. Aslin believes mental health care is an area of support that is still lacking. A tip she would give to a new volunteer would be to have patience, create plans, and to ask themselves, “How are we going to get this to work?”. She is getting ready for the next hurricane season by preparing her family and friends, as well as getting her home ready inside and out.
Case Work

Minerva Aponte

In 1994, Minerva Aponte saw an advertisement on a newspaper for the Red Cross who was seeking caseworks for the Service to Armed Forces. As a military spouse, she wanted to offer her help to anyone she could. Ever since, she has built a 26 year long career in the Red Cross working in over fifteen disasters. Her goal is “to go on and become an international volunteer.” When Hurricane Maria made landfall, she was in her home in Mayaguez, where she was stuck for five days due to the damage caused by the storm. When she was able to leave her home, the first thing she did was to visit her mother and then find the Red Cross to sign up to become a volunteer. She urges for improvements in bulk distribution, so that supplies can be more effectively distributed to remote areas. She suggests direct home delivery and remote area outreach rather than only focus on urban and easily-accessible areas for distribution.

Volunteer

Maria del Mar

Maria is from Aquas Buenas in the center of the island of Puerto Rico and originally got involved with the Red Cross last year before the most recent hurricanes. She showed up at the Red Cross headquarters one day last March, in hopes to help the organization in any way she could. Within the Red Cross she works within logistics and bulk distribution of supplies. During the recent hurricanes, Maria recalls being at home with her family, trying to prepare. She hoped they would have been prepared for Maria, but no one was prepared for a disaster of such magnitude. Communication fell apart immediately, and transportation was limited. She described the worry she felt when she could not contact her family. Once she ensured her family was okay, she reported to the Red Cross and began to help however she could. Maria said, “We dropped our things, came together, and made it happen.” Maria is proud of the work she has done with the Red Cross and hopes that her impact was a positive one.

Volunteer Leader

Jack Morgen

The former Division Disaster Executive, Jack Morgen, continues to volunteer with the Red Cross as a Volunteer Leader within preparedness, response and recovery for Southern Region, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. He joined the Red Cross in 1979 as a CPR and First-Aid Instructor in Rome, Georgia. His main work through the Red Cross has involved hurricane and flood relief. He was involved in relief work for hurricanes Andrew and Floyd, but still sees Maria as the most destructive and traumatizing of any disasters he has responded to. Jack encourages the Red Cross in Puerto Rico to decentralize and focus on mobility within the island for the next hurricane season. He encourages volunteers to find areas of service that they enjoy working in and feel passionate about. Through the Red Cross, this is easily available compared to other NGOs, since there is a wide variety services provided.

Randi and Rita in stalling smoke alarms in Loiza.
Nurse and Volunteer

Rebecca Aquino

Rebecca has always been involved in some form of voluntary work but began as a registered nurse within the Red Cross since Hurricane María made landfall. She works as a disaster repair leader and has helped all over the island, including working in hospitals as a nurse to care for those affected, the distribution of food, water, generators, and supplies for the hospitals, and anything else that was needed. When María made landfall, she was in her house with many members of her family. Directly after the storm, she ensured everyone was okay and checked in with those in her neighborhood. Her efforts to prepare for the next season include increasing emotional support, distributing medication, increasing education within the community, and larger amounts of supplies. To Rebecca, the most vital services that were used after the hurricane were the pharmacies to supply the necessary medications to those who needed them. Her advice to incoming volunteers is to maintain good mental health in order to be able to help others. Rebecca has made a huge impact within the Red Cross and has been there to help countless individuals and families with her work.

We had a great time getting to know you.
Thank you for the opportunity!
Key Ideas

- Communicate as a Red Cross member to the general public as they are preparing for the upcoming hurricane season to be prepared mentally and physically for a longer amount of time compared to what they previously thought. (ie. 5+ days of supplies instead of just 2 or 3)
- Remind staff and volunteers to take time for themselves and make sure they are mentally and emotionally healthy as that will make helping others easier.
- Be flexible with the changing day to day needs of the community and don’t expect to be working in just one area.
- Be willing to listen to other staff members, other volunteers, and the clients who are needing help to figure out what is most important in each situation.
- Communication is essential between Red Cross staff and volunteers as well as between Puerto Rico and the mainland in times of disasters.

Montana State University Breaksaway

Top: Meghan Rockwood, Randi Maiers, Becky Brand, Emily Billow, Lane Dornbusch  
Bottom: Brittany Fourstar, Ryan Blake Flatt, Rachel Matsko, Carolina Dequech Garcia, Rita Park, Rachel Park

The MSU Breaksaway program is offered through the Office of Student Engagement at Montana State University (MSU) and allows students to explore their passions for service by giving them the opportunity to travel to and volunteer in places that they may not have been able to otherwise. The group pictured above consists of 11 students and staff, all from different backgrounds and with areas of study ranging from community health to engineering. They worked with Disaster Services during their stay in San Juan. While their reasons for embarking on this trip vary, they are united by a drive to serve and make a positive impact on the communities to which they travel.