

# Puerto Rico

**International Medical Corps has been supporting long-term recovery efforts in Puerto Rico since two Category 5 hurricanes, Irma and Maria, struck the island in 2017. When earthquakes shook the island in January 2020, our San Juan-based team responded within 48 hours, providing critical sanitation, hygiene, nutrition and mental health services.**

Within two months, COVID-19 had spread to the island, exacerbating needs among those already vulnerable to healthcare interruptions or experiencing the mental health effects that accompany repeated disasters and ongoing stress and uncertainty.

Today, we continue essential response and recovery work in Puerto Rico. Our work includes providing essential relief supplies, strengthening health facilities so that they can treat COVID-19 patients and provide vaccinations, and training local first responders and community leaders.





## COVID-19 RESPONSE

In March 2020, our teams were in the field addressing the basic needs of earthquake survivors when the first cases of COVID-19 were detected in Puerto Rico. Today, International Medical Corps is supporting four tertiary health facilities with emergency medical field units, critical care equipment and personal protective equipment (PPE). Across Puerto Rico, our teams have distributed more than 513,300 articles of PPE to health personnel and first responders. Jose Alcolver, Respiratory Therapist at San Cristobal Hospital, had this to say about the lifesaving support provided: “There was a moment where, even with money, we couldn’t buy PPE—the demand was so high that the prices had doubled, tripled or more. Having this equipment meant that our frontline staff had adequate protection, and this allowed our facility to keep that staff covered and safe.”

## EARTHQUAKE RESPONSE

The January 2020 earthquakes in Puerto Rico devastated a significant geographic area, with 33 municipalities included in state and federal emergency declarations. With homes damaged and thousands displaced, evacuation shelters and informal camps were set up—but they lacked safe access to water, sanitation and proper hygiene. International Medical Corps reached 9,143 disaster-affected women, men and children with services and relief supplies, and served 610,306 persons in Puerto Rico through community awareness and outreach. As relief turned to recovery, our teams provided access to safe water via water survival boxes, and addressed problems at community wells to help people meet their own basic needs in future emergencies.

## HURRICANE MARIA RESPONSE

In the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, International Medical Corps began working with L Asociación de Salud Primaria de Puerto



In Puerto Rico, International Medical Corps has:

- ▶ trained 1,287 health personnel and community leaders on mental health and nutrition emergency response topics;
- ▶ delivered food support to 3,053 parents and children;
- ▶ screened 4,842 patients for COVID-19 at supported facilities;
- ▶ distributed more than 513,300 articles of PPE;
- ▶ distributed 20,791 hygiene kits; and
- ▶ reached 1,563,671 individuals with mental health and COVID-19 awareness campaigns.

Rico (ASPPR)—a network of more than 70 federally qualified health clinics focused on providing care to low-income families across the island—to ensure that health facilities could keep their doors open to serve the vast influx of patients affected by the disaster. With electric power down across the island, our support included supplying generators and water bladders to six health facilities, enabling them to restore electricity and provide clean drinking water at the health centers. To reach remote communities, International Medical Corps deployed physicians and nurses alongside ASPPR staff, providing mobile clinical care in hard-to-reach areas and reaching about 1,000 people. International Medical Corps medical teams also worked to address underlying health needs exacerbated by the storm, including hygiene and nutritional care.





## MENTAL HEALTH AND PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT

Using a community-based approach, International Medical Corps conducts awareness sessions focused on psychoeducation for emotional regulation, suicide prevention and crisis-coping skills, and supports referrals when higher levels of care are needed. In the aftermath of the earthquakes, our mental health teams—assisted by 49 local volunteers—provided psychological first aid to about 1,000 individuals, including 134 children suffering with emotional distress.

When COVID-19 began spreading in March 2020, our mental health teams pivoted from in-person events to virtual training, and turned to traditional and social media to address suicide and mental health openly and directly. A series of media campaigns that included television, radio, newspaper and social media messaging combatted the myth that talking about suicide could provoke self-harm, and provided tools for stress management and emotional regulation for community members overcome with the loss and uncertainty caused by repeated disasters. In addition, we donated technology to enable four psychiatric facilities to transition their outpatient services to telehealth, and provided 174 health personnel and first responders with training on suicide prevention and 34 mental health patients with therapeutic art activities to relieve stress and facilitate emotional expression.







## NUTRITION

During Hurricane Maria, our teams partnered with two local organizations—La Liga de la Leche and Alimentación Segura Infantil—to implement nutrition activities, including counseling on breastfeeding and on infant and young-child feeding (IYCF) practices for new and expectant mothers. Together, we reached 771 women with counseling and education, while distributing more than 1,060 breastfeeding-support items.

In response to the earthquakes, our teams mobilized these existing relationships to provide training on IYCF in emergencies, and supplies for new and expectant mothers, including food support, electric and manual breast pumps, and baby kits. These baby kits—packaged as emergency backpacks—can now be used by families in case they are again displaced by an emergency, providing them with easy access to nursing covers, bibs, hand sanitizer, mosquito nets, thermometers, diaper cream and more.

Both the earthquakes and COVID-19 disrupted proper nutrition channels. Households experienced unemployment and food insecurity. Power outages directly affected seniors and people with chronic conditions such as diabetes and hypertension, leaving them without refrigeration for medications and electricity for life-sustaining medical equipment. Our nutrition teams provided training and capacity-building to parents, caregivers, and health and social workers with courses on “Healthy Shopping on a Budget” and “Management of Chronic Disease in Emergencies.” We addressed immediate and long-term recovery needs with food gift cards, so that parents could practice health shopping and cooking. We also provided solar upgrades to fix electricity-reliability problems at a nursing home that frequently experienced brownouts, despite being home to 18 vulnerable patients, several of whom relied on enteral feeding.



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A pre-eminent first responder since 1984, International Medical Corps delivers emergency medical and related services to those affected by conflict, disaster and disease, no matter where they are, no matter what the conditions. We also train people in their communities, providing them with the skills they need to recover, chart their own path to self-reliance and become effective first responders themselves.

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