



Residences in flood-affected areas of Morovis municipality continue to face challenges with standing water.

Torrential rains on May 10 totaling more than 10 inches over two days in some places caused flooding and landslides throughout Puerto Rico—mostly rural communities in the north, west and central mountainous regions—and prompted the island’s governor to declare a state of emergency in 22 of the island’s 78 municipalities.

On Wednesday, May 15, International Medical Corps deployed an assessment team to the flood-affected rural municipalities of Morovis and Ciales in central Puerto Rico, where the team met with staff members from two primary healthcare organizations managing networks of community health centers serving impacted communities. The staff of both organizations discussed significant operational, health and socioeconomic challenges that their facilities, staff and communities face that have been caused or exacerbated by the flooding. This includes geographic, distance and transportation constraints in rural communities with existing rough terrain—for example, during the floods, the road leading to one patient’s home was completely submerged, forcing them to use a boat to cross the floodwaters and access treatment at the health center.

Access to clean water is presenting significant challenges and concerns for affected communities. Healthcare workers report that although the flood waters have now mostly subsided, the flooding has forced municipality water-distribution systems to intermittently shut down due to high turbidity in the water, resulting in health facilities experiencing inconsistent access to clean water. The disruption of local clean water supply has raised serious infection-prevention-and-control challenges for health facility staff, and concerns about sanitation and hygiene management in the community.

The disruptions to water, sanitation and hygiene, as well as disease management, come at an especially challenging time for local health systems in Puerto Rico, which are responding to an ongoing dengue outbreak that in March was declared a public health emergency. Standing water left by the floods is presenting optimal conditions for mosquito reproduction, which may exacerbate the current surge in dengue cases in flood-impacted regions.

With existing high poverty rates in Morovis and Ciales (approximately 48% and 56%, respectively), many residents’ chronic food insecurity and an inability to meet basic needs have been compounded by the flooding. Community members who lost stored food and household belongings to floods may not have the financial means to replace essential items. Elderly community members with mobility constraints have been unable to leave their homes and access food or the food-assistance programs they depend on. Some health center staff have used their limited resources to assemble food baskets for low-income community members and medically vulnerable patients in their flood-impacted catchment areas. Though this immediate assistance was helpful, these staff members reported serious concerns with the worsening widespread food insecurity and economic challenges witnessed in their communities in the wake of the floods and in anticipation of future emergencies this hurricane season.

Healthcare workers also reported that a significant number of their patients living with chronic illnesses faced serious issues meeting their regular treatment needs during and after this emergency, particularly those with heart conditions, respiratory problems, diabetes, HIV and mental health challenges. The staff shared that, after the flooding, some of these

FAST FACTS

- On May 10, regions of Puerto Rico were inundated by heavy rain totaling as much as 10 inches in some areas, causing destructive flooding and landslides.
- Some flood-impacted communities have poverty rates between four to five times the national average, presenting a challenging road to recovery for many families.
- Flood-soaked communities are now bracing for more potential flooding, as the National Weather Service has predicted “above normal” rainfall in the coming weeks.
- Community members with chronic health conditions are struggling to access healthcare services while experiencing worsening food insecurity.

patients arrived to their health center asking for urgent support and supplies to manage their chronic conditions. Diabetes patients brought their insulin to the nearest facility in search of consistent cold storage following or in fear of power outages. Patients expressed concerns about supplies to help them manage their treatments at home in an event of another emergency, asking about such items as portable respiratory devices and coolers to store medications; however, the health centers did not have the resources to procure and distribute supplies to meet this level of need.

Healthcare organizations are identifying lessons learned from the floods to prepare for more heavy rain and flooding, as the National Weather Service has predicted above-normal rainfall in Puerto Rico from May 22 through June 4. Healthcare staff said that when flooding occurs, it is better for them to sleep in the facility, because road conditions are often unsafe. In addition, staying overnight helps ensure continuity of healthcare services. However, because their facilities do not have the capacity for in-patient care, they need items such as cots, blankets and pillows to support staffing plans as part of their emergency preparedness plans.

International Medical Corps Response

As a critical component of the three-day assessment that started May 15, International Medical Corps' team distributed essential emergency-response supplies to the healthcare organizations they met with, to support their efforts to meet the needs of the communities they serve.

International Medical Corps distributed such items as personal-use water filtration and purification supplies and equipment, water test kits, large first aid kits, tarps and more. The team also distributed 30 \$50 food vouchers for health center staff to use with their most medically vulnerable and food insecure patients.

We are supporting staff from the health centers in Morovis and Ciales in their efforts to develop lists of their priority supply needs, both for ongoing emergency response efforts and for their preparedness plans. With these priorities identified, our Puerto Rico team will be able to offer material and technical support for response, recovery and future preparedness initiatives.

Next, International Medical Corps' assessment team will travel to municipalities in the western regions of the island to meet with local healthcare providers and actors to continue identifying the most pressing needs there.

International Medical Corps in Puerto Rico

International Medical Corps has been an emergency responder in the United States since 2005, when we partnered with local community clinics overwhelmed by Hurricane Katrina. In the US, International Medical Corps is working more closely with stakeholders than ever before—for example, working with national, state and local partners in the healthcare system to address the significant challenges that faced domestic healthcare services during the COVID-19 pandemic, and deploying emergency response teams in response to natural disasters that have struck in recent years.

International Medical Corps has collaborated with partners to deliver health services in Puerto Rico since Hurricanes Irma and Maria devastated the island in 2017. In recent years, we have responded to a number of emergencies on the island—including the 2020 earthquakes, the spread of COVID-19 and Hurricane Fiona—while supporting efforts by local healthcare actors and nonprofit organizations to strengthen their capacity for emergency preparedness and response.

Today, we are focused on improving access to healthcare services, helping communities to recover while building local resilience and contributing to the development of the local healthcare workforce so that community health centers are better equipped and able to meet local needs. Our priorities remain centered on community-based initiatives that support health centers, as well as the health of the individuals and families they serve who are most at risk for food insecurity, chronic illnesses and the impacts of disasters. By supporting frontline organizations as well as their communities, International Medical Corps is able to incorporate strategies that improve access to nutritious foods, improve emotional and physical well-being, and strengthen household- and organizational-level preparedness for future emergencies.



International Medical Corps staff members distribute emergency response supplies to PryMed Medical Care Inc., in the municipality of Ciales.