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March 8, 2018

Spring Break in Puerto Rico — Helping Hurricane Victims

With FEMA assistance lagging and hundreds of thousands still lacking basic amenities, an intrepid group of RWU Law students heads to San Juan, offering legal assistance to their neediest fellow citizens.



Part of RWU Law's contingent to Puerto Rico meets with Rhode Island Secretary of State (and Puerto Rico native) Nellie Gorbea. L to R: 1L Jonathan Vazquez, Assistant Dean for Library and Information Services and Associate Professor of Law Raquel Ortiz, Gorbea, and 1L Nathalie Vega Crespo. Image Credit: Rhode Island Department of State

March 7, 2018 Michael M. Bowden

Early on the morning of September 20, 2017, Hurricane Maria — a powerful Category 4 storm with 150 m.p.h. winds — made direct landfall on Puerto Rico, bisecting the island and drenching it in feet of rain, killing at least 60 people and causing widespread damage. It was the strongest storm to hit the U.S. territory in 89 years.

Today, nearly six months later, approximately 200,000 families and businesses remain without power. The island faces a growing mental health crisis as victims wrestle with their losses from the storm, and the need for legal assistance is unprecedented. Roger Williams University School of Law students will soon be there to help: with [Alternative Spring Break](#) (ASB) slated to kick

off next week, they're heading to San Juan, where they will perform intake for FEMA appeals and applications for other benefits.

RWU Law students have been participating in Alternative Spring Break projects since 2005 (the first took students to New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina). This year, 53 students will disperse to 18 sites in eight different states in addition to Puerto Rico, including Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Georgia, Maryland, Massachusetts (Fall River, New Bedford and Worcester), New York and Rhode Island. Hosts include the renowned [Bronx Defenders](#), [Brooklyn Defenders](#) and [The Southern Poverty Law Center](#); a dozen projects also involve RWU Law alumni hosts.

The Puerto Rico intervention could not be more timely: out of 1.1 million applications for FEMA relief from Hurricane Maria received by the end of January, only 39 percent have been granted to date, and only four percent of denied applications had been appealed. The deadline for applications was recently extended to March 20, and the law provides that appeals must be filed within 60 days of the denial – so the ASB group will be busy.

“It is great to see one of Rhode Island’s leading institutions, RWU Law, reaching out to help our fellow U.S. citizens in Puerto Rico with their legal expertise.”

~ Nellie Gorbea, Rhode Island Secretary of State

The law students will be working with [Ayuda Legal Huracan Maria](#) (ALHM), which has – in cooperation with local community organizations – provided legal aid brigades in more than 40 of Puerto Rico’s 78 municipalities. Other law students from Columbia, Harvard and Yale will be working alongside RWU Law’s volunteers during the week of March 12. The Roger Williams group will be led by someone who knows the territory well – Assistant Dean for Library and Information Services and Associate Professor of Law [Raquel M. Ortiz](#).

“Although I’ve lived in the mainland U.S. most of my life, I was born and raised in San Juan and I’ve lived through many hurricane seasons on the island,” Ortiz said. “But those 18 years did not prepare me for the devastation caused by Hurricane Maria, which impacted in some way everyone I know in Puerto Rico.”

When asked to assist with the ASB project in Puerto Rico, Ortiz said she “jumped at the opportunity to help.” She added, “At first, I was apprehensive to provide direct legal services after almost 20 years out of law school working as a librarian. Now I hope not only to help the students in our ASB group, but to also provide some legal assistance myself because so many people still need help. I am following the same training program as the ASB students and look forward to serving the people of my beloved island through our ASB work.”

Recently, Ortiz and two of RWU Law’s ASB students, 1Ls Nathalie Vega Crespo and Jonathan Vazquez, met with [Rhode Island Secretary of State Nellie Gorbea](#) – a native of Puerto Rico herself – to talk about the task ahead.

“Americans have a long history of helping each other out in times of need,” Gorbea said. “The devastation left by Hurricanes Irma and Maria has been one of the most challenging situations the island has ever faced. It is great to see one of Rhode Island’s leading institutions, Roger Williams University School of Law, reaching out to help our fellow U.S. citizens in Puerto Rico with their legal expertise.”