

# Rolling up our sleeves for Puerto Rico

*Disaster relief isn't what labor unions are known for, but hundreds answered the call in the wake of Hurricane Maria*

**BY MISTY RICHARDS**  
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When we landed in San Juan, Puerto Rico, we landed in chaos. Nobody could have predicted the devastation that Hurricane Maria would bring to Puerto Rico. Streets had flooded and homes and businesses had their roofs ripped off of their walls. Families slept in bedding covered in toxic black mold. Fifty-one hurricane-related deaths have been reported, though the lack of basic infrastructure, clean water and nutritious foods threatens the lives of the Americans on the island. With almost no power or communication infrastructure, no food on the shelves in grocery stores, and no medical care, it was an infuriating and heartbreaking scene, having myself just come from comfort and safety.

I was notified that there was a need for volunteers on a Friday, and on Tuesday, Oct. 3, we were landing in a disaster zone.

The national union federation, the AFL-CIO, pulled together 100 drivers, 100 carpenters, and a 100 nurses to spend two weeks as disaster relief volunteers. AFL-CIO leadership brokered a deal with United Airlines that if they could gather 300 volunteers from the unions, United Airlines would supply staff and an airplane to get us there.

In awe of Donald Trump's blatant neglect for American lives, my union brothers and sisters from the Teamsters and Carpenters Union joined together with the Federation of Nurses and Health Professionals, jumped into action. Myself and five other nurses and health professionals from Oregon accompanied the delegation.

We split into teams of nurses, nurse practitioners, and drivers, and headed out for door-to-door canvassing, where the nurses sought out those who needed medical attention, treated those folks, and manned pop-up clinics and health education hubs.

The need was immense. Families struggled with dehydration, and with their doctors and health care providers in the same boat as them, had no access to medical treatment or follow-up treatment from recent surgeries.

We quickly exhausted medical materials, while local supplies were also depleted. Out of necessity we improvised. One nurse practitioner performed a minor surgery using a buck knife sterilized by a lighter. Similar examples of desperation and inspiration were everywhere.

We did our best to bring medical care and necessities like water filtration to communities on the island, and the memories of unity formed from necessity will always stay with me. One remarkable experience was the opportunity to assist one of our union brothers and his family.

He is a nurse whose elderly parents took care of an orphanage. In the earliest hours of the morning, he took a van into the hills and drove, stopping to supply aid to those who were in desperate need, until he found the orphanage. The roof had been ripped from the main building where the kitchen and living quarters were located. There was nowhere to prepare food and there was black mold everywhere.

The rest of the team – eight health care professionals and two Teamsters – joined him to the orphanage and we went to work providing care to the children living in the facility. Some of the nurses treated locals' medical needs while others listened with care and taught the residents skills they would need to stay healthy. The nurse from my team, the son of the wonderful

caretakers, joined the carpenters in replacing the roof.

Even with the long hours and nights spent on cots in an old stadium locker room, leaving the island was hard knowing that there was so much to be done. Still, I didn't return home with a downtrodden spirit. I left Puerto Rico overwhelmed by inspiration from the communities, their kindness, and their strength together.

During my time there, I realized that there's an idea that folks have, that I had, which is that success is all but guaranteed as long as we're armed with an 18-point plan; that we'll be able to do more and do better than we would by just jumping into action. But nearly a month and a half after Hurricane Maria hit, so many of us on the mainland are waiting for Trump to make disaster relief a top priority and begin to form that 18-point-plan.

What seemed like chaos and poor planning during the first day or two was actually a demonstration of love, the demand for dignity, and the come-together-and-do-what-needs-to-be-done approach that defines the labor movement.

Disaster relief isn't what labor unions do; it's not what the AFL-CIO sets out to do every day, month and year. But working alongside hundreds of folks from all different locals, nationals and international union affiliates, each of whom volunteered to get on that plane with me with every bit as short of notice as I had, reminded me that what we do is what is needed, and we do it together. On a day-to-day basis, union folks don't usually have to step outside of their specialty and skill set, but our coordinated efforts reached out to thousands of people, providing critical services and learning what it takes to take care of each other without the help of the U.S. administration or an 18-point-plan.

*Misty Richards is a registered nurse living in Oregon City*

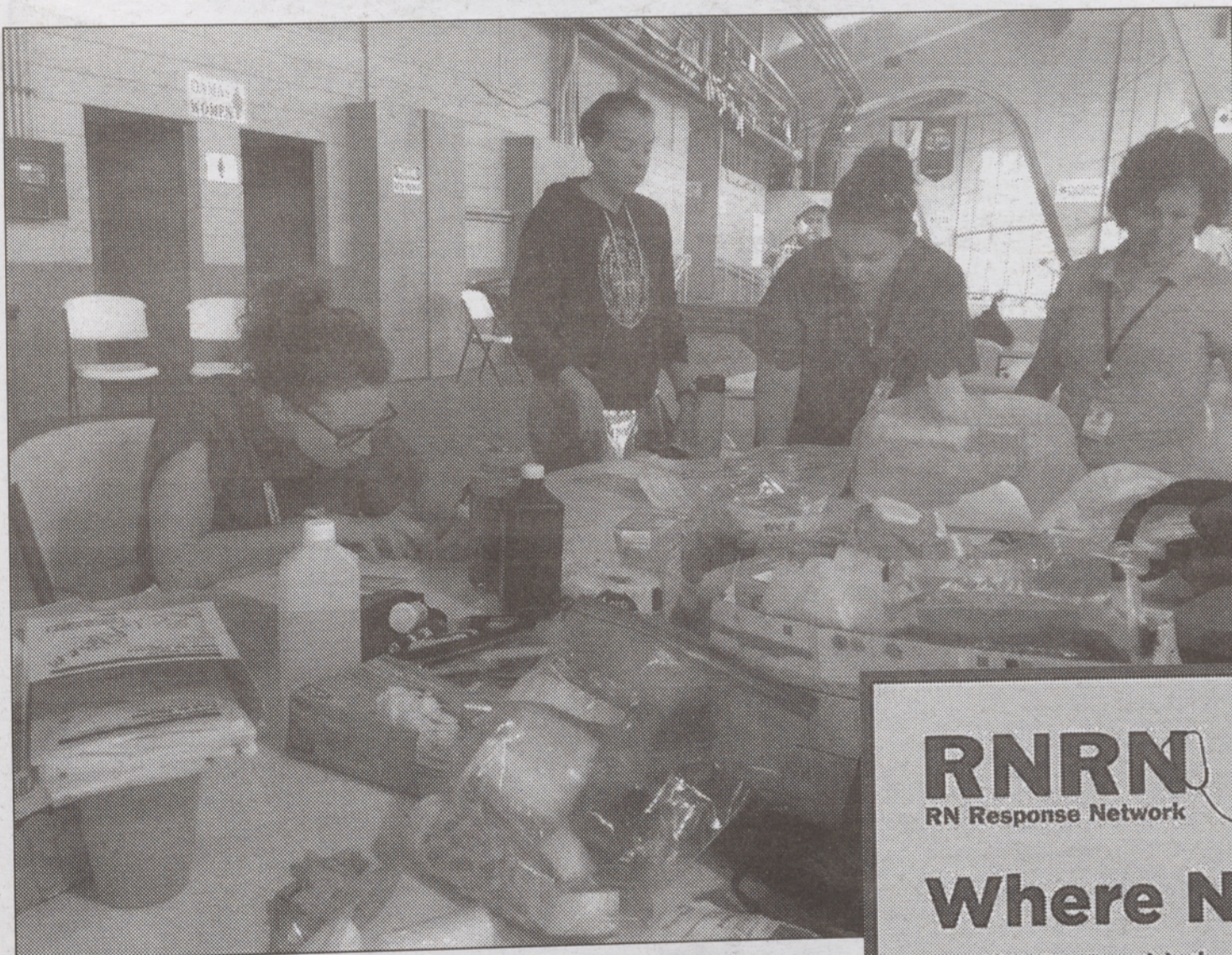


PHOTO COURTESY OF THE OREGON FEDERATION OF NURSES AND HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

Above, nurses in Puerto Rico assess their supplies and the work to be done in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria. At right, a map showing the areas where the RN Response Network targeted their aid.

**RNRN**  
RN Response Network

National Nurses United

**Puerto Rico »**  
**Hurricane Maria Disaster Relief**

## Where NNU/RNRN Volunteers Brought Aid

**Healthcare** (arrow pointing right)

**Food** (arrow pointing right)

**Water** (arrow pointing right)