

Conditions in Puerto Rico complicate Baptist relief efforts

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ALPHARETTA, Ga. (BP)—Hurricane Maria knocked power out for nearly the entire population of Puerto Rico, leaving the island's infrastructure devastated and complicating Southern Baptist disaster relief ministries.

Initial reports estimate it will take months before services can be restored completely.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency asked Southern Baptist disaster relief on Sept. 21 to send teams to the island to start serving up to 200,000 meals a day.

Sam Porter, national director for disaster relief at the Southern Baptist Convention's North American Mission Board, worked with state Baptist disaster relief leaders to mobilize a response.

Within three hours, "We had kitchens capable of feeding 100,000 meals a day committed to be driven to Florida, packed onto boats and shipped to Puerto Rico," Porter said.

Initially, his office hoped to have volunteers in Puerto Rico by Sept. 25.

However, he soon learned the extent of damage in Puerto Rico made the situation extremely volatile, temporarily complicating Southern Baptists' ability to get to the island and work there.

'The whole world is watching'

When Irma smashed through the Atlantic and the Caribbean a week and a

half earlier, the damage sustained in Puerto Rico was severe, but the island avoided a direct hit.

A Southern Baptist disaster relief kitchen from Alabama had been diverted from Puerto Rico to the U.S. Virgin Islands at the request of officials because of the damage sustained there. That unit, along with another, will serve 5,000 meals a day in the Virgin Islands.

“The whole world is watching what’s happening with these historic storms,” Porter said. “Our response will tell Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands that ‘Southern Baptists care about you.’”

When conditions allow it, the goal is to have between six and 10 kitchens sent to Puerto Rico, Porter said. Between 200 and 300 volunteers will be required to operate the kitchens and serve the meals.

Volunteers ‘tired and weary’

Porter said volunteer fatigue is a significant concern right now, in the wake of Hurricanes Harvey and Irma.

“A lot of our teams are tired and weary. We really need more Southern Baptists to step up in a big way in the next month,” he said.

David Melber, vice president of Send Relief at NAMB, noted Southern Baptists will provide support packages to pastors of Baptist churches in the U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico. The packages will include generators, food, water, financial resources and additional items as needs continue to be made known.

“Our desire is to affirm the position of the local church in all the response areas,” Melber said. “Our goal is to get the local church positioned to be the pillar in the community. We also want to make sure local pastors are supported and empowered to lead their churches.”