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Nonprofits as 'One-Stop Shops' for Basic Needs During Climate Disasters



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In the days after Hurricane Maria struck landfall in Puerto Rico in 2017 and plunged the archipelago into the largest blackout in U.S. history, dozens of nonprofit health clinics, a lifeline to low-income patients, went dark.

Without electricity to power dialysis machines or access patient records, many clinics closed. Others operated on expensive diesel-fueled generators, with limited running water and medical supplies and little information amid collapsed communications networks.



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“Hurricane Maria was a rude awakening,” says María Cecilia Rodríguez, a public-health specialist at the Puerto Rico Primary Care Association, which represents 22 health centers. “But it also led to a lot of very positive change.”

Six years later, Puerto Rico’s community health centers boast some of the most disaster-resilient clinic infrastructure in the world, including a solar-powered smart grid and a new radio-based communications network. They’ve also helped pave the way for a new model of climate preparedness that aims to transform local nonprofits into hubs of resilience in a warming world, places where residents can plan for and get help after climate-driven weather events.

After the hurricane, a torrent of philanthropic funding helped spark more than 40 solar projects, plus critical building repairs, at clinics across Puerto Rico. In 2018, the pharmaceutical giant AbbVie donated \$50 million to Direct Relief for community health-care services in Puerto Rico. It’s since been used to outfit clinics with emergency-preparedness supplies and solar-powered systems and backups, such as water pumps, which provide clean water during blackouts.

“The absence of power means the absence of services,” says Thomas Tighe, president of Direct Relief, which began prioritizing power resiliency and climate-change preparedness in the hurricane’s aftermath.

Now, he says, when disaster strikes — or the power goes out — the clinics are ready.

One-Stop Shops

The nation's 1,400 federally funded nonprofit health centers may not see themselves as first responders to the climate crisis, but they are "first receivers and points of care for over 30 million people in this country," Tighe says. In recent years, Direct Relief has expanded its energy-resiliency projects to include nonprofit clinics in California, where wildfires present similar dangers for power outages, and its own 155,000-square-foot solar-powered pharmaceutical warehouse.

In Puerto Rico, nonprofit health centers have always provided more than just clinical care to patients, often acting as a place where people can access or learn about other social services, says Darielys Cordero-Rosario, executive director of the Puerto Rico Primary Care Association.

"Nobody knows more about a community than a community health center," she says.

As climate change increases the frequency and severity of extreme weather events, especially in [Black and brown communities](#), local nonprofits have begun taking on new roles as so-called community resiliency hubs, which provide resources and support to help people prepare for and adapt to the impact of climate change.

As local resiliency hubs, these nonprofits can act as "one-stop shops" for basic needs, information, and connections to emergency relief during climate-related disasters, says Charlotte Gossett Navarro, chief director for Puerto Rico at the Hispanic Federation, which has also funded solar projects and other resiliency initiatives at clinics and local nonprofits.

In many rural towns in Puerto Rico, she says, a local clinic, library, or community center might be the only place where residents can charge their phones or access

clean water and food during a blackout.

“We can’t deploy solar energy quickly enough to make sure that every single person has consistent energy” during a power outage, says Gossett Navarro, but “if you have a place within a reasonable distance that you can access power, that’s a way for us to address these needs in this transitional period.”

‘We Were Left Behind’

It isn’t just health clinics that are building more climate-resilient infrastructure and operations. Similar initiatives are under way at nonprofits in other places disproportionately exposed to the negative impacts of climate change, especially in the aftermath of natural disasters.

In 2012, Hurricane Sandy inundated one of New York City’s largest urban farms with over two feet of water, devastating crops and causing tens of thousands of dollars in damages. A decade later, Red Hook Farms has been rebuilt on higher ground — atop two feet of compost and a massive slab of concrete — to avert future flooding.

The farms form part of Red Hook Initiative, a sprawling youth-leadership and community-development organization, whose main building made it through Hurricane Sandy largely unscathed, and quickly became a resiliency hub for nearby public-housing residents after the storm.

“Not only were we not prepared but we also felt like we were left behind,” says Maddy Jenkins, who first stumbled upon the Red Hook Initiative as a local resident after losing power during Hurricane Sandy and is now the organization’s senior manager of communications.

As extreme weather becomes more common, more nonprofits will find themselves on the front lines of disasters.

The initiative became a “beacon of hope for someone like me,” she says, “a young mom who really didn’t know where to go to get these quick, immediate needs met for my son.”

In nearby Long Island, as part of its quest to produce as much energy as it consumes, a local United Way headquarters will soon become one of the largest solar-powered nonprofits in the state. It also aims to become a command center for other nonprofits in case another large storm wipes out power, as Hurricane Sandy did for half a million residents in 2012.

And, across the country, for nearly two decades, Interfaith Power & Light has helped houses of worship and faith-based groups lower their carbon footprint. More recently, the organization has helped several groups, including Hope Methodist Church in South San Francisco, as they form resiliency hubs fortified with renewable energy and equipped to withstand and support their communities during heat waves, wildfires, and other extreme weather events.

Many houses of worship have “been in the same place for 100 years,” says the Rev. Susan Hendershot, president of Interfaith Power & Light, making them especially vulnerable to the effects of climate change. Yet that same longevity also makes them powerful candidates for resiliency hubs, she says, as many religious groups already boast food pantries and other social services to meet their neighborhoods’ needs.

“Adaptation to extreme weather events is necessary, and it is also an opportunity for them to further serve those who are most vulnerable in their communities,” Hendershot says. “The heart of most spiritual traditions is to care for our neighbors and care for our sacred Earth.”

Big Price Tags

Most Americans [have already felt](#) the impact of climate change in their communities, and as extreme weather becomes more common, more and more local nonprofits will find themselves on the front lines, says Thaddeus Pawlowski, director of the Center for Resilient Cities and Landscapes.

“When you’ve got a government that doesn’t handle things, community-based organizations have to pick up the slack,” says Pawloswki, who has advised nonprofits on adapting their facilities for climate change.



WILLIAM VAZQUEZ, DIRECT RELIEF

After Hurricane Maria in 2017, Direct Relief helped outfit clinics in Puerto Rico with solar-powered systems and backups, such as water pumps, so they'll be able to stay open to serve residents after future storms.

While solar panels and certain other kinds of resilient infrastructure can pay for themselves through savings in energy costs, others, like flood-resistant architecture or cooling systems for heat waves, can be difficult for nonprofits to afford on their own. The Red Hook Initiative, for example, has struggled to secure enough money to ensure its building could survive another hurricane.

Philanthropy has been an important resource for filling those financing gaps, says Pawloswki, who also praised the federal government's Inflation Reduction Act as "basically a Green New Deal," citing its historic investments in climate change. That

includes [\\$45 million](#) earmarked for nonprofits to adapt to extreme weather and climate change.

In the years since Hurricane Maria made landfall in 2017, Puerto Rico alone has faced dangerous landslides, extreme heat waves, with temperatures that felt as hot as 125 degrees Fahrenheit, and increasingly intense tropical storms and hurricanes. Days before Hurricane Maria's fifth anniversary, another powerful storm, Hurricane Fiona, struck Puerto Rico, leaving the vast majority of residents without electricity for several days, and some for much longer.

This time, however, not one of Puerto Rico's newly renovated community health centers closed its doors.

The types of solar-powered solutions that helped clinics remain open "should have been done earlier," says the Puerto Rico Primary Care Association's Rodríguez, who acknowledged that some clinics still needed to rely on diesel-powered generators, which can be difficult to procure, to get through the storm.

"These kinds of systemic changes only happen slowly," she says. "Change takes time."

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CLIMATE CHANGE



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