



How do you solve a problem like Maria? By welcoming hurricane refugees and helping them find jobs

By Laura Byrnes, APR, CPRC

Here's something I didn't anticipate writing about for January. Typically, this space, this month, is dedicated to a year-in-review – a “that was then, this is now” retrospective of how things are improving, and make no mistake, they are – or a look forward into the new year and what we can expect of the next 12 months.

But like I said, I didn't know when I sat down in early December that I'd be writing about the lingering effects of this past, and in no way lamented, hurricane season.

And yet, here we are: two months after Hurricane Maria ploughed through Puerto Rico and much of the island is still off the grid.

Can you imagine?

When Hurricane Jeanne strafed Florida in 2004, we lost power for a week and, believe me, it was unpleasant. So, when Hurricane Irma threatened to engulf our entire state last September, I decamped to where I knew I'd not only be safe but where I could continue to enjoy the creature comforts upon which I'd come to rely. This time, we lost power for 10 days and I didn't come home until it had been restored, even though that meant a heck of a long commute each day.

So, no. I can't say I'd have the fortitude to cope with what those in Puerto Rico dealt with, and what many are still dealing with.

Not surprising, then, that we are seeing an influx of refugees. In November, Gov. Rick Scott called for a strong Puerto Rico response effort. After all, Puerto Rico is a US Territory and its 3.4 million residents are American citizens.

Anita Richardson, workforce liaison for the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity's division of workforce services, put it this way: “Many families displaced by Hurricane Maria are already present and arriving daily in Florida. As such, Gov. Scott has committed that we, as a state, must do everything possible to effectively support the response effort.”

CareerSource Citrus Levy Marion and the 23 other workforce development regions in the CareerSource Florida network are answering the governor's call. It is not known precisely how many refugees are in our area, but we stand ready to connect them to employment opportunities and support services, whether we help one or 100.

We already have local employers, including On Top of the World and Central Florida Electric of Ocala, interested in hiring displaced Puerto Ricans.

Also, in addition to our fee-free employment services, those here because of Hurricane Maria may be eligible for Disaster Unemployment Assistance (DUA) through the Puerto Rico Department of Labor.

Brenda Chrisman, our career centers and business services officer, said that what we really need now is “help from the community to get the word out to those whose current priority is getting back on their feet while they are here.”



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Help spread the word through your church, children's schools, civic and professional associations, even your workplace, if permissible, and social networks.

Services are available in English and Spanish and include employment referrals, resume assistance, training and internship opportunities and access to additional funds and partner programs.

DUA provides financial assistance to individuals whose employment or self-employment has been lost or interrupted as a direct result of a major disaster declared by the President of the United States and who are not eligible for regular unemployment insurance (UI) benefits.

Those interested in filing a DUA claim may do so online at <http://www.trabajo.pr.gov/>. An initial Unemployment Insurance (UI) claim may be filed by clicking on Reclamación Inicial (Initial Services) and a continued UI claim may be filed by clicking on Reclamación Semanas Subsiguientes (Claim Subsequent Weeks).

If you know of anyone who needs assistance with the Hurricane Maria DUA application and filing process and/or employment services, please call Ilianette Hernandez at 800-434-JOBS (5627), ext. 1119; visit careersourceclm.com/pages/maria; or stop by our Career Center at 2703 NE 14th St., in Ocala any time Monday-Friday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

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