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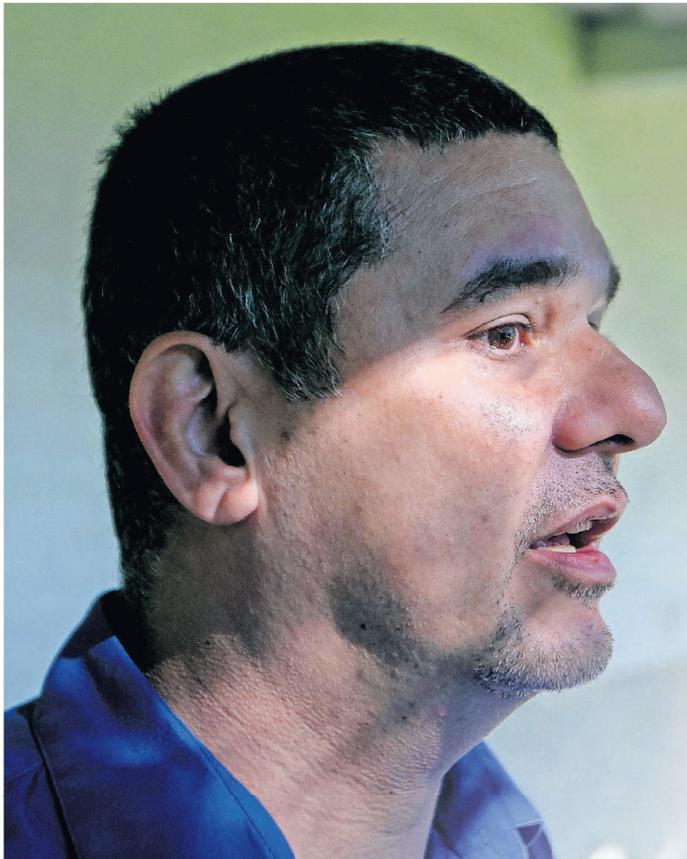


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Gilberto Rivera brought his family from Puerto Rico to Florida after Hurricane Maria devastated their home. He was a teacher there and has found a job teaching history at Lake Weir Middle School. He is shown at the school on April 16. [ALAN YOUNGBLOOD/OCALA STAR-BANNER]

A NEW HOME

Hundreds of Puerto Rico residents have come to Marion County after Hurricane Maria

By Joe Callahan
Staff writer

Amanda Vazquez thought she was about to die. Hurricane Maria was hurling water into her home in Juncos, Puerto Rico. The Valenciano River, which had never flooded the four-bedroom home in three decades, had risen 4 feet inside the dwelling.

Vazquez, her two teenage daughters and her sister climbed on top of a bunk bed and prayed they would be saved from the wrath of Maria, the most powerful hurricane to hit Puerto Rico in nearly a century. At that moment, the storm was coming ashore 20 miles south of Juncos. Vazquez, 34, whose oldest daughter has a rare autoimmune disease, didn't know if they would make it.

That day in September, as she sat atop the bunk bed, Vazquez couldn't have imagined that in a few months her family would be living in Marion County and her daughter would be getting treatment at UF Health Shands Hospital in Gainesville.

Vazquez and her family are among the thousands of Puerto Rican residents who escaped deplorable conditions left behind by Maria. About 750 — a best-guess official estimate — have

arrived in Marion County as part of this massive migration to the U.S. mainland.

After Maria passed over the island on Sept. 21, Puerto Ricans awoke to devastation. Many homes were destroyed and power grids were mangled across the 3,515-square-mile island commonwealth, which is about the size of Alachua, Marion and Levy counties combined.

People were dying because they couldn't get medication. Maria had dumped 30 inches of rain; flooding wiped out many roads and bridges. It would be months before many of the citizens would get help. To this day, many remote areas remain inaccessible.

For 136,000 Puerto Ricans, Maria was the final straw. A decade-long recession already had crushed the Puerto Rican economy. Then came Maria's damage, which will take years to repair. It was time to start over on the U.S. mainland.

Of those 136,000 Maria refugees, 56,477 are in Florida, according to the Center for Puerto Rican Studies. That migration number is nearly seven times higher than before the storm hit. Currently more Puerto Ricans live on the U.S. mainland (5 million) than on the island itself (3.1 million).

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Why it matters

Many Puerto Ricans have migrated to Marion County since Hurricane Maria devastated the U.S. territory seven months ago. The migration led many Puerto Ricans to Orlando. Now many families are moving to North Central Florida to find better jobs and affordable housing. Local community organizations and government agencies are helping families rebuild their lives. This story provides context, statistics and includes a variety of voices — most notably some of the new Marion residents themselves.



Amanda Vazquez, 34, moved her family from Puerto Rico to Ocala after riding out Hurricane Maria. Vazquez holds a photo of herself (far left) and her two daughters, Gabriella, 16, and Kamila, 14. [JOE CALLAHAN / STAR-BANNER]

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HOME

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From 2005 to 2016, 500,000 Puerto Ricans migrated to the mainland United States. Though 298,380 of those Puerto Ricans originally arrived in Florida during that 12-year span, 198,968 moved to other states. The net Puerto Rican migration to Florida was 99,412 — about 8,425 people annually — from 2005 to 2016, according to Center for Puerto Rican Studies estimates.

Since Maria, migration to Florida has escalated by 670 percent compared to pre-Maria numbers.

Of those latest refugees, 11,878 are students from Puerto Rico who are now enrolled in Florida school districts, according to a Florida Department of Education report from March. The most (3,473) are enrolled in Orange County.

Since December, many Puerto Rican residents who first landed in Orlando have continued north. Area officials say the migration to North Central Florida has escalated since late 2017.

"They are migrating north to find affordable housing," said Summer Gill, executive director of the Marion County Literacy Council. She said social service agencies throughout North Central Florida have seen an uptick in the need of services to help migrating families.

Latest migration

The University of Florida's Bureau of Economic and Business Research has been studying Puerto Rican migration post-Maria. Late last year state officials were reporting that 300,000 Puerto Ricans had flown by commercial airlines to Florida.

That number was based on the large volume of flights leaving Puerto Rico for the United States mainland. But Richard Doty, a demographer with the bureau, said many of those passengers were relief workers, and not all were from Puerto Rico.

Doty said the best guess — based on federal aid requests, school enrollment data, applications for government assistance and other data — is that migration to Florida from Puerto Rico is 50,000.

He said Marion County has received a maximum of 1.5 percent, or 750 people, of those arrivals. In reality, the net migration to Marion could be as low as 350 or as high as 975, Doty said.

"Many lost everything," he said. "They are not buying or renting (in Florida) and many live with friends or family. That makes an exact estimate difficult."

Doty said the bureau's research shows that the migration has slowed significantly in recent months. In fact, all indicators, especially school enrollment, suggest

the migration has slowed to a trickle.

In Marion County, the school district has received 221 hurricane refugee students since last fall. Most are from Puerto Rico after Maria, though several dozen came from Texas after Hurricane Harvey and from South Florida after Hurricane Irma.

Suzanne McGuire, the school district's director of family, school & community engagement, said most of the local Puerto Rican refugees are living with other family members in the area.

McGuire said about 175 students from Puerto Rico are enrolled at one of Marion's 51 schools. A month ago that enrollment was 154 students. Another 67 students once enrolled in Marion have transferred to other districts.

West Port High School has 16 students from Puerto Rico, the most of any local school. College Park Elementary School has 15 and Sunrise Elementary has 13.

Licenses to work

Laura Byrnes, spokeswoman for CareerSource Citrus Levy Marion, said her agency has been using state grants to help prepare Puerto Ricans for the job market. Byrnes said many of the Puerto Rico residents being served by her agency are professionals, and "the biggest barrier they face is obtaining their professional license or certification in Florida so that they can work."

CareerSource is using a state grant to help families find lodging while they scramble to get those Florida certifications and licenses. The grant, called Disaster Unemployment Assistance (DUA), is administered through the Puerto Rico Department of Labor.

Brenda Chrisman, career centers and business services officer for CareerSource, said that local employers such as Central Florida Electric of Ocala and On Top of the World have expressed interest in hiring Puerto Rican refugees.

"What we're really looking for 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," Chrisman said in prepared remarks.

Byrnes said that many of the families that have arrived in Marion County are orthopedic technicians, civil engineers, respiratory technicians, information technology, dental assisting and nursing, both LPNs and RNs.

CareerSource is helping some displaced Puerto Ricans with an employment plan, hotel and child care costs until these families can get their certifications or license to obtain jobs.

"We are helping one man, who is a lawyer, with the cost of taking the Florida Bar to start a practice," Byrnes said. Elisabet Jusino got help

from, and then was hired by, CareerSource. She previously lived in Aguadilla, Puerto Rico, where she worked for Puerto Rico's Department of Children and Families.

"When Hurricane Maria came I was in my home," she noted. "It was an awful experience. My home was filled with water. Maria was a horrible storm. It was so long and strong. It was a horrible experience. The sound of the wind was so awful, you could not rest. Thanks to God that I did not lose my home. My family are all OK."

Jusino decided after Maria that she could not withstand the "economic situation of the country anymore."

"The distance from my work and my home was too much," said Jusino, who arrived in Ocala with her son on Oct. 11. "It has been a big challenge. I have a friend in Ocala that opened the door to their home."

She said "people in Ocala are very nice and kind." Jusino said she was born in Manhattan and feels that Ocala is very different: a quiet place.

"It is difficult to find work, with the language (barrier)," she noted.

"But I'm giving my best, learning as much as I can. I am blessed I have opportunity to work at CareerSource. It is a temporary job, but I am training to learn the most I can. It's very different from social work. I have been a social worker for more than 12 years. I love my profession."

A teachable moment

While many Puerto Ricans, like Jusino, await news about receiving their Florida licenses and professional certifications to get a job, Puerto Rico's educators — at least, those with the proper post-secondary education — can get hired immediately.

Just ask Gilberto Rivera, 47. He, his wife and three children — ages 8, 6 and 2 — rode out Maria in their Ricon home, located on the western side of Puerto Rico in an area known for tourism and surfing.

Though his home was on the other side of the island from where Maria made landfall, there was widespread devastation to the infrastructure.

Plus, the ground under his home was become more and more unstable, causing landslides that threatened his home.

After spending two months without power and struggling to find fresh water, his 2-year-old son developed a rash. That rash is not uncommon and very treatable, but medical services were scarce and he needed help.

One night, several men attempted to come into his home and several neighbors yelled and they ran away. Times are desperate, and he knew it was time for a fresh start on the mainland.

Rivera said many members of his family had moved to the mainland long before

he made the trip. He said he wanted to stay in Puerto Rico because that is where he grew up. He had a great job as a teacher at a prestigious college preparatory school called Southwestern Educational Society Elementary School, which the locals call SESO. Rivera taught sixth-grade history.

"It was just getting too dangerous," Rivera said. He and his wife, Arlene Vazquez, and three children flew to Orlando.

His mother-in-law, who had been drinking water out of contaminated streams after Maria, got sick. Not long after the family arrived in Kissimmee, where they stayed with family, she died at Florida Hospital.

"I say she died as a result of Hurricane Maria," Rivera said. "It may not have been from the wind, but she died because of the hurricane."

Rivera's luck changed in December when he attended a teacher's job fair in the Orlando area.

At that fair was a Marion County representative seeking to fill many positions. Rivera interviewed with Lake Weir Middle School Principal David Eilers, who hired him to teach U.S. history.

For a few weeks, after he started his job in January, Rivera rented a car to drive from Kissimmee to Lake Weir Middle. The family had no possessions — just the clothes on their backs.

Lake Weir Middle employees rallied to help. One teacher, who also is a real estate agent, found the family a home in Belleview. Another teacher's father gave the family a used 2003 Toyota Camry.

Others donated furniture. The family is now settled in the area.

Rivera, an avid billiards player, joined the family-oriented Silver Spring Moose Club on Maricamp Road and belongs to a pool shooting league.

The family is thriving. Once his wife gets a job, he said, they will be in a good place.

Community responds

That's just one example of how the community is embracing its newest members. The United Way of Marion County is spearheading an event with 20 social service agencies to help families find jobs and housing.

"These are our new neighbors," said Natalie McComb, United Way's vice president of resource and development. "We want to make sure every family is secure and safe."

Faith Beard, United Way's vice president of community impact, said she started noticing the local influx in January.

"Many have family members here and are in search of affordable housing and a job," Beard said.

"We want to make sure each family has the resources they need to succeed as a resident of Marion County."

The Community Help, Hope & Resource Fair will be held from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. May 19 at CareerSource CLM, 2703 NE 14th St., Ocala.

Meanwhile, a new coalition called Abrazo Boricua, which is Spanish for "Puerto Rican Hug," launched in Orlando a few weeks ago. The group is bringing together 10 nonprofits to help Puerto Ricans who have settled in Florida. Abrazo Boricua's website (www.abrazoboricua.com) has been designed to give new Puerto Ricans arrivals a one-stop location to find affordable housing, workforce opportunities, English courses, legal assistance and more.

Looking to the future

For the Vazquez family, Marion County became the destination because of a need for quality health care. Vazquez moved to Marion County with her sister, Veronica Lopez, 22, and her two daughters, Gabriela, 15, and Kamila, 14.

After Maria passed and floodwaters receded, Vazquez discovered many walls were cracked and occasional downpours would send more water leaking down on them. The home was heavily damaged but they were alive. They decided to see how long it would take to get power and supplies.

For more than a month, the family lived on small portions of rice and beans, and one small bottle of water, each day. Gabriela was battling systemic lupus erythematosus, an autoimmune disease linked to an increased risk of certain types of cancer.

"Finally, her (Gabriela's) doctor told me that we have to take her to the (United States mainland) or she was going to die," said Vazquez, who was interviewed in person using, at times, a Spanish-English translation app.

Vazquez said she was unable to get her daughter's medications.

Vazquez said many people died in Puerto Rico because of the lack of medications. Vazquez, her sister and daughters boarded a humanitarian flight to Orlando in late October.

Quickly, officials pointed Vasquez north, knowing her daughter needed to be treated at UF Health.

As of now, Vazquez said she does not plan to return to Puerto Rico to live, though she will visit when she can afford to go see family.

Vazquez, who worked as a respiratory technician for 12 years, hopes to get her certification in Florida soon.

"They pay better here and the health care is better," Vazquez said.

"I will miss Puerto Rico, but this can be a better life and my daughter can get better treatment."

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