

Conn. Attorneys Respond to Crisis in Puerto Rico

By Michael Marciano, The Connecticut Law Tribune
September 29, 2017

Connecticut's legal community has been eager to assist fellow Americans in Puerto Rico who have experienced a humanitarian crisis since Hurricane Maria hit the island Sept. 20.

Speaking from the island's capital of San Juan on Sept. 29, attorney Julio López Varona, executive director of the immigrant-support network Make the Road Connecticut, said there are still major problems with infrastructure and communications in Puerto Rico, particularly to communities far from the cities. "There are tons and tons of resources that are getting to the island, but most of them are stuck in ports," he said. "So now there is a logistical nightmare, which stems from bureaucracy and from old laws."

López Varona said people are waiting in line for eight hours or more for gasoline, and while San Juan has places where access to water and electricity have been restored, that is not the case inland, where people are suffering in 90-degree heat without the essentials. "There is no communication, so nobody knows what's really happening," he said.

Many radio stations still are not working, so even that form of information dissemination is lacking, López Varona said. "So we get a lot of the official word that everything is getting better, but there are some criticisms here and there."

As a helicopter flew audibly by, López Varona added, "At this point, they are militarizing the island, which is kind of fitting. We're becoming a militarized colony. Go figure."

Of the more than 5 million Hispanics of Puerto Rican descent living in the U.S., more than 250,000 live in Connecticut, according to census data. Hartford attorney Ken Krayeske said he has in-laws on the island.

"My father-in-law, Pedro Bermudez, who was a teacher at the Sports [and Medical] Sciences Academy in Hartford, is down there," he said. "A stranger called my sister and read a handwritten note from him saying he's alive but he's lost everything."

Getting messages out by word-of-mouth has been common in Maria's wake, interviewees agreed.

Krayeske and many other lawyers linked to Puerto Rican communities have been calling out for help on social media in the past two weeks, urging the government to focus greater effort on assisting the hardest-hit communities in Puerto Rico. Krayeske is one of many people who were vocal on social media following Maria, urging the federal government to lift restrictions outlined in the century-old Jones Act, which requires that all goods shipped to Puerto Rico be sent in U.S.-made vessels. Republican Sen. John McCain and Democratic Rep. Nydia M. Velázquez pushed for lifting the restriction, as did Puerto Rico Gov. Ricardo Rossello. A temporary waiver was granted by the Trump administration Sept. 28.

Krayeske's father-in-law is a resident of downtown Yabucoa, where Maria made landfall. "This is a man whose survival skills cannot be questioned, and he's saying, 'We've got to get out of here,'" Krayeske said, noting that an earlier storm on Sept. 6, Hurricane Irma, had already caused widespread damage, cutting power to 1 million Puerto Ricans before the more powerful Maria made its direct hit two weeks later.

"The response to Irma was slow because all of the municipalities in the state are bankrupt," Krayeske said. "They didn't do enough cleanup quickly enough—the catch basins were not cleaned and trees became flying weapons. The one-two punch has made this much worse, and obviously so many people we know around here are working to put money together to get down there."

Puerto Rican-born Hartford attorney Richard Zayas acknowledged that supplies—especially water—are in great need in the rural areas of the island, and getting those supplies to their destinations is one of the biggest problems.

"They have a big mess," said Zayas, whose mother and brother live in Ponce. "One of the things I've been telling people is they can wire money to their families. That's probably the best thing they can do."

Zayas said organized efforts are happening in Hartford, including on Albany Avenue and in the Park and Broad neighborhood, where a collection was scheduled to take place Saturday, Sept. 30. Zayas noted that he was urging community members to contribute via the radio show "La Ley y Usted" ("The Law and You") on WPRX 1120 AM.

Zayas said one Connecticut-based group that is organizing assistance to Puerto Rico residents is the Bridgeport-based Asociación Club Puertorriqueño de Connecticut. (The group can be reached by email at clubpuertorriqueno@yahoo.com.)

Attorney Edwin Colon, director of the Immigrant Children's Justice Project for the Hartford-based Center for Children's Advocacy, said Connecticut's Puerto Rican population is feeling anxiety and sadness in the wake of Hurricane Maria. "It's very difficult for a lot of people to just sit idle and watch what's happening. Some of us are still waiting to hear from our families."

Colon said it's too early to say what legal complications will arise, but noted that flood-related issues are a certainty, along with various property losses.

"The legal system is a hybrid of common law and civil tradition," he said. "Some date back to 1930. Many of the laws will dictate whether someone can actually sue the sovereign state. There may be sovereign immunity that the state may have to waive, but the sovereign state is broke. So even if you can sue the government, I don't see how that will actually provide relief."

Colon said Puerto Rico's economy and infrastructure were suffering before Irma and Maria hit. "The infrastructure of the island was fragile before the crisis. When you have two massive storms come two weeks apart into the territory, it's going to bring devastation."

Back in San Juan, López Varona said curfews have been running from 7 p.m. to 7 a.m., and with the vast electrical outages leaving roads dark, it doesn't make sense to go driving at night. "It's very grim and it's extremely hot. We sleep well, but I can't imagine if you're an older person inland trying to wait it out." López Varona said he has been organizing contributions and asking people to contribute to the Hurricane Maria Community Recovery Fund, located online at mariafund.org, which is specifically helping impoverished communities of color. He also agreed with Zayas that wiring money to family members is helpful.

Despite all of the problems, interviewees said community members, for the most part, are working together.

"There is some crime, but I think it is focused mostly on survival," López Varona said, noting that some diesel fuel had disappeared from the base of a cell tower, interrupting communications. "There might be some organized crime that is forming around this necessity, but people are just focusing on surviving."