



COMMUNITY OUTREACH

## **Puerto Rico is Rising! Healing the Trauma After Hurricane Maria**

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Hurricane Maria forever changed Puerto Rico and its people in just 24 hours. More than 1,000 people died during the storm, or from a lack of medicine, water, power, communication and other resources within a month after Maria hit.

Five months later, almost half a million Puerto Ricans are still without power. Houses are buried or gone, particularly in the mountains where the poorest people live in wooden dwellings. Many people still bathe with baby wipes. Traffic lights and signs are absent, making driving a new public health hazard.

On top of these ongoing acute challenges, the livelihoods of tens of thousands of people are gone for years to come: coffee, avocado, and plantain orchards have vanished. Many of our fellow American citizens feel abandoned by their government.

And yet, the resilience of the land and people is strong. Trees look twisted and curled like something out of a Dr. Seuss book, but the foliage is growing back. Birds and animals displaced by the storm have found new homes and are returning to their old ones. Communities are organized, holding one another, and providing local citizens with help. Puerto Rico Se Levanta (Puerto Rico is Rising) is the national mantra and creed.

AWB: Providing Care Around the World

Shortly after Hurricane Maria hit, people from Puerto Rico began to ask Acupuncturists Without Borders (AWB) for help with trauma relief. AWB was already coordinating disaster relief efforts in Texas and Florida due to Hurricanes Harvey and Irma, as well as the concert shooting in Las Vegas. At first there were not enough energy, water, food or lodging resources in Puerto Rico to support volunteers, but we began planning nonetheless.



By December we were ready and able to go: a team including six acupuncturists from the U.S. and four from Puerto Rico, spent a week offering treatments in the south, west and inland areas of the island.

We partnered with the Miami-based *Sifre Center* and collaborated with two Puerto Rico-based groups - *Salud y Acupuntura par el Pueblo* and *Boriuca Barefoot Doctors* - that provide acupuncture, herbal medicine, massage, aromatherapy, and naturopathic therapies in hard-hit communities. The Mayway Corporation, Acu Market, and Lhasa OMS donated herbs and acupuncture supplies. AWB offered a one-day field training for 15 local acupuncturists, physicians, naturopaths and body workers to support ongoing treatments and clinics.

We treated over 700 first responders, FEMA workers, and hurricane survivors, including home-bound elders and people with disabilities, in Salinas, Carite, Guayamas, Indieras Baja, Utuado, San Juan and Cayey. The level of community appreciation was profound, as was the deep inspiration that local people reflected back to the AWB team.

A FEMA worker after his treatment, said, "I have a lot of stress in my work here. The situation here for the people is very difficult and challenging. I don't always take care of myself because there is too much to do every day. After I received the treatment I felt relaxed, more like myself and I am ready to do my work and go forward ..."

Another team member shared, "There are few words to describe the magic of this amazing island and its people ... it is very healing to work here in the middle of devastation, pain and chaos because of the openheartedness of the people. I feel incredible gratitude and humility."

From February 26th to March 4th, a second AWB team of practitioners from the U.S. and Puerto Rico offered hundreds of treatments on the western part of the island. The FEMA Voluntary Agency assisted AWB with setting up clinics in Moca, Aguada, Rincon, Guacio, and Aguadilla.

Diana Fried (team leader), said, "We treated 100 people today on a basketball court in Aguada. This is a community that feels forgotten. They thanked us profusely for remembering "el oeste," the western region of Puerto Rico. They said AWB was the FIRST non-government group to come and help them. They told us of the huge mental health issues now - suicides, domestic abuse of women, children and elderly ... This woman told us, in tears, about what happened to her house, her family. She said the acupuncture made her feel like "God was hugging her." She hugged and kissed us and asked us to come back please and thanked us for making her community feel like someone cared."

In 2018, trauma healing in Puerto Rico is a primary focus of AWB's disaster relief work given the ongoing immense devastation that challenges its people. AWB needs your help to provide direct services and train local practitioners to offer ongoing weekly treatments so that our fellow citizens can recover and move forward. Thank you to the amazing volunteers and supporting partners that make this work possible!

Please help by donating to the AWB Puerto Rico Disaster Fund at [www.acuwithoutborders.org/donate](http://www.acuwithoutborders.org/donate).

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