“Puerto Rico: Challenges of the Forgotten Places”

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Principal Investigator

Credits:

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PUERTO RICO
NORTH ATLANTIC OCEAN
CARIBBEAN SEA
SAN JUAN
Isabela
Aguadilla
Arecibo
Dorado
Manati
Carolina
Bayamón
San Seastian
Utuado
Fajardo
Ceiba
Caguas
Juncos
Mayagüez
Adjuntas
Aibonito
Coamo
Cayey
Humacao
Vieques
San Germán
Yauco
Ponce
Guayama
Yabucoa
Santa Isabel
Mona Passage
Isla Desecheo
Isla Mona
Isla de Culebra
Isla de Vieques
Río Grande de Añasco
Río Grande de Manati
Lago Loíza
Pasaje de Vieques
Cabo Rojo
Isla Caja de Muertos
Orlando
Tampa
FLORIDA
Miami
Nassau
THE BAHAMAS
Havana
Matanzas
Pinar del Río
Santa Clara
Cienfuegos
Ciego de Avila
Nueva Gerona
CUBA
Holguín
Las Tunas
Caribbean Sea
Bayamo
Guantánamo
Santiago de Cuba
CAYMAN ISLANDS (U.K.)
TURKS AND CAICOS ISLANDS (U.K.)
Grand Turk
Puerto Plata
HAITI
DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
San Juan
Port-au-Prince
Santo Domingo
La Romana
JAMAICA
Kingston
Puerto Rico

Events Pre-COVID-19

- **Recession** (unemployment rate twice as high as national level)
- **Hurricane Irma** (August 30, 2017) – Category 5 with 175-mile per hour (mph) winds
- **Hurricane Maria** (September 20, 2017) – Category 4 with 155-mph winds
  - Death toll - 2,975 and 4,645
  - Destroyed power grid
    - Many without full power for almost 1 year
    - Lost access to internet/television/cell phone usage
  - School closures (children sheltered indoors)
  - Lack of access to clean water, food, medicine, fuel, etc.
    - 80% of island's crop value was lost
  - Poorest residents – disproportionately affected

photo credit – Erick Probeck, 2017

Sources: The Guardian, 2018 & 2019; NBCNews, 2020; Mercy Corps, 2020; photo credit – Erick Probeck, 2017

Mental Health Crisis: Pre-COVID-19

- From November 2017 – January 2018: Linea PAS – 246% increase in attempted suicide calls compared to prior year
- 83% increase in thoughts of attempting suicide
- Dr. Oxiris Barbot, "Puerto Rico's Mental Health Crisis", NY Daily News (January 6, 2018)

"Among all the tragedy, what I found most disturbing was that every person I spoke to knew of someone personally, or within a degree of separation, who had attempted or completed suicide after the storm."

"Teachers having to act on behalf of students to prevent parents from killing themselves in front of their kids." Dr. Barbot

Source: the Guardian, 2018; photo credit: Erick Prosbeck, 2017

Additional Events Pre/Post COVID

- **6.4 Magnitude Earthquake** (January 7, 2020)
  - Hundreds sought temporary shelters
  - 250,000 lacked access to clean drinking water
  - School closures
- **COVID-19** (March 13, 2020)
  - Lack of employment – highest insured unemployment rate in U.S. at 23% (mid June 2020)
    - 300,000 filed for unemployment due to COVID (August 2020)
    - Slowed/closed tourism-based companies
  - Supply chains
  - Lack of COVID-19 testing – creates uncertainty

MercyCorps, 2020

Source: MercyCorps, 2020; Semanaz, 2020; Capital Gazette, 2020

Additional Events Pre/Post COVID

- **COVID-19 continued…**
  - Intensified public health issues (mid August 2020 – 600 new cases per day)
  - School closures
- **Severe drought** (June-July 2020)
- **Tropical Storm Isaias** (July 30, 2020)
  - Power outages/flooding

Source: MercyCorps, 2020; Semanaz, 2020; Capital Gazette, 2020

Experiences of our Trainers

David Casavant,
Sustainable Workplace Alliance (SWA) Founder / Program Director

Edgardo Ortiz Lugo,
President of Emergency Management Task Force / SWA Trainer

Leonel Rivera,
SWA Trainer

Carlos Olmeda,
SWA Trainer

Trainers' Views: COVID-19 Challenges

- Edgar – goes to unpopular, remote areas (uses his own money, vehicle, resources)
  - Poor; elderly
  - Lost jobs; Lack of opportunity to work (closed business / slowly re-opening)
  - Food deserts
- Afraid to leave homes
- Living arrangements
  - some living in tents/roof tarps
  - day-long power outages still occur from time to time, especially in rural areas

photo credit – Erick Probeck, 2017

Worker Challenges: Post-COVID-19

- People want to work/some college-educated, but scarcity of jobs
- Finding job opportunities
  - Many in rural areas lack internet; can't afford computers – unable to apply for jobs online
  - Some have cell phones – call a hotline number for jobs, but difficult to reach someone
  - Mass exodus of talents leave island
- Language barriers
- No college degree – need skills to become marketable
- Power outages – during a regular rainstorm
  - Some rural places – still without power/running water

Worker Challenges: Post-COVID-19

- Multi-generational homes or family homes within a cluster – regular visits
- Rural residents – lack transportation to work (no public transportation; no taxis/uber)
- Food insecurity
  - Not a strong agricultural community
  - Food drop sites / Meals-ready-to-eat
- Increase in criminal activity/drug abuse/drug dealing/gangs
  - Gun shortages in Puerto Rico

photo credit – Erick Probeck, 2017

Source: ABCNews, 2020

Worker Challenges: Post-COVID-19

- COVID-19 – caused people to stay indoors (weight gain, depression, suicide, etc.)
  - Must know how to communicate with people with traumas
- Meals-Ready-to-Eat – high in calories/salt (could be problematic - underlying conditions)
- COVID-19 fatigue – vaccinations
  - Pair COVID-19 training with other trainings (start each training module with a brief awareness training)
  - People are hesitant to take vaccines, but vaccinations are starting to increase
  - Focus on vaccinations (locations in respect to their communities)

Worker *Needs*: Post-COVID-19

- Must stimulate job opportunities first
  - Government possibly provide tax breaks
- Teach entrepreneurship (taking a 'self-reliance' approach)
- Provide grant-writing services / how to find grants (i.e., purchasing hurricane-prep items for people, especially in rural areas); local organizations don't look for grants
  - Fund more grants through local non-profits, etc
    - Partner with / better support of non-profits/local organizations - help distribute resources to remote areas
  - Politics get in the way of getting resources to vulnerable people

Worker *Needs*: Post-COVID-19

- The need for environmental health/safety training has increased
- High demand for Spanish training
- Additional trainers – survival/life skills; package beans/rice to store for 20+ years, etc.
  - Preparation - Ensure people have emergency plans; store food items; grow their own food; disaster response kits, go-bags (for humans/animals), etc.
- Additional workplace inspectors / home inspectors
  - Occupational Safety and Health Administration – enforcement of workplace regulations; lack of personnel, so violations are present
  - Rural/mountainous areas – labeled inaccessible
- Logistics – people of certain areas know where to go for resources (i.e., food, water, etc.)

photo credit – Erick Probeck, 2017

COVID-19 Training Adaptations

- Train more people virtually than in-person
  - Not all workers/trainees have computers – neighbors
- Physical training – can't fit-test respirators virtually; can't touch or feel respirators/equipment
- Need for blended learning to really be effective (coursework/physical)
  - theoretical learning
- Logistics of spacing / directing people into different entrances to ensure Centers for Disease Control and Prevention protocols are met

Partnerships / Alliances

photo credit – Erick Probeck, 2017

Non-profits

- Emergency Management Task Force, PR
- Producir Inc. Cubuy canovanas , PR
- Fundacion por PR con Amor Inc. Guayama, PR
- Brigadas de Amor y Enlaces Inc. Caguas, PR

Churches

- Iglesia Bautista de Lomas. Canovanas , PR
- Iglesia Dios Primitiva Inc. Juncos, PR

Government

- Puerto Rico Occupational Safety and Health Administration (PROSHA) – used their facility for training

Military

- USSACP CADET Loiza, PR

Volunteer First Responders

- Rescate Interno Inc. Cataño , PR

Society

- American Society of Safety Professionals

Email listservs – advertise about our trainings

Partnerships – Masks

- Knotzland - in Pittsburgh, PA
  - Source and rescue materials from manufacturing spaces to keep them from going into landfills (makes bowties)
- Ene Penny Couture in Shreveport, LA
  - Make African clothing and teach people how to sew
- Combined made about 5,000 masks that were distributed to Puerto Rico

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Questions??

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Krystal & Husband, Cyle, at Castillo de San Cristóbal
(San Juan, Puerto Rico, 2014)