

New Bedford Police and other area organizations bring donations, support to storm-ravaged Puerto Rico

Thanks to generous donations by New Bedford area residents, supplies were donated to nearly 4,000 families in Puerto Rico who are still struggling with the aftereffects of Hurricane Maria, which devastated the island last summer.

New Bedford Police Det. Gene Fortes was among the community leaders who brought supplies to island residents, many of whom are still without power and basic supplies. The supplies were collected through a fill the truck drive at the police headquarters parking lot last summer and through subsequent donations.



Conditions on the island remain challenging.

“I was very grateful and honored to represent the New Bedford Police Department and the City of New Bedford in my home nation of Puerto Rico,” Det. Fortes said. “This was a very rewarding effort to help people who are still struggling with the aftereffects of the hurricane but are determined to rebuild their lives.”

Det. Fortes grew up in Puerto Rico and came to the continental U.S. at age 18 to serve in the U.S. Marine Corps. He has lived here since.

Island residents have been resilient, surviving and even thriving during more than 135 days in some places without electricity and water, Det. Fortes said.

Calls for food and supplies to help storm-affected residents

generated an outpouring of generosity. Hundreds of New Bedford area residents rallied and collected supplies and resources to send to people in need in Puerto Rico.

The supplies were distributed to 19 towns: Juana Diaz, Ponce, Yauco, Caguas, Villalba, Orocovitz, Adjuntas, Loiza, Tao Baja, Guanica, Manati, Maricao, Santa Isabel, Santurce, Aibonito, Canovana, Cidra, Cayey, and Utuado.



Det. Fortes with an elderly resident of the island.

In addition to the New Bedford Police Department, organizations involved in the effort included Northstar Learning Centers, Inc., Edwin Cartagena and United New Bedford, Iglesia Vida del Reino, Worcester, Telemundo Providence and Puerto Rican Professional Association of Rhode

Island.

The House of Representatives in Puerto Rico gave a shout out to NBPD for their efforts.

The experience was an emotional one for Gisette Mejias of New Bedford, who was representing Iglesia Vida del Reino of Worcester. As a former resident of Puerto Rico, she said she was sad to see people in need of basic supplies but touched by her culture's resiliency and generosity. "Although people may not have much, they share with everyone else," she said. "It was an honor to serve my country."

Det. Fortes was especially touched by the image of a church literally torn from its foundation by the storm's impact. The church is now just a shell, exposed to the elements on all sides. But every week, residents visit their church to worship and pray.

The island still needs help and Det. Fortes urges people not to forget about them. More visits to distribute supplies and help rebuild the island are planned, he said.



The church was ripped from its foundation, but the foundation

of the church parishioners gathering for community and comfort remains.