



# Puerto Ricans still seeking refuge in Florida months after Hurricane Maria decimated their homes

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**Three months ago, 19-year-old Alondra Aguilar was living in a comfortable house with her parents on the island where she grew up.**

Now she's living in a trailer park almost 2,000 kilometres from home with eight others.

Hurricane Maria not only flattened much of Puerto Rico, it shattered her life.

Alondra is one of 195,000 Puerto Ricans who have moved to Florida since the hurricane hit on September 20.

The storm destroyed houses, and also knocked out power and water supplies.

"It's not light," in Puerto Rico Alondra explains, as she walks around the tiny trailer she's now sharing with friends on the outskirts of Orlando in central Florida.

Around 1 million people in Puerto Rico are still without electricity.

Lack of it means many businesses are still closed and there are few tourists, usually the mainstay of the island's already struggling economy.

That means there is no work.

Many of those who are now in Florida endured the situation for some weeks, but with no end to the situation in sight, they left, causing a housing crisis in Orlando where they have come because it is the centre of Florida's Puerto Rican population.

## Families splintered by mass migration

Alondra shows me the tiny bedrooms in the trailer where adults and children are sleeping, some four to a bed.

Her family has been splintered by the storm.

While she's in Florida, her mother has gone to New York seeking work, her brother is in North Carolina and her father is still at home.

There are broken families like this across Florida amid one of the largest mass migrations in US history.

The migration rivals the exodus from New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, and the movement of Cubans fleeing the Castro regime to Miami in the 1980s.

Another 100,000 people are expected by the end of the year.

Clara and her 8-year-old son Gabriel have been staying with a friend for two months.

They do not know when they will be able to go home because Gabriel has a life-threatening kidney condition and needs reliable medical care.

Lack of power has dramatically affected hospitals across the island, which have been reliant on generator power that, at least initially, was also affected by a shortage of fuel and fuel transport.

Gabriel says he misses his own bed, and his dad and brother, who remain in Puerto Rico.

## 'Depression, anxiety and uncertainty'

Community organisations in Orlando have been struggling to deal with the influx, amid a developing housing shortage and sudden pressure on healthcare services and schools who have had to cater for thousands of new people overnight.

United Way's Raquel McCormick says many of those who are arriving are coming with no plan, and are highly stressed and exhausted.

"We've got lots of individuals coming through our doors. We've gotten seniors, we've gotten people that have come through our doors with babies," she says.

"So everyone is at a different place, but I think that overall the feelings seem to be the same: desperation, anxiety, uncertainty."

Maria de Los Angeles Podesta is one of those people.

She was forced to shutter her successful restaurant due to lack of electricity, and arrived in Orlando on a one-way ticket with almost nothing.

"It's been six years since my dream came true, but now it's not a dream — it's a disaster," she says at a hotel that's being paid for by United Way until she finds her feet.

She's found a job, as a hostess at a restaurant at the Disney resort, but she has little hope that she can ever return to Puerto Rico.

"I'm glad that I'm here and God gave me this fresh new start," she says.

"I lost everything in Puerto Rico. So, it's hard for me to go back."

After the storm hit, the Trump administration faced criticism for its slow response to helping Puerto Ricans, who are US citizens.

Now the Federal Government is dealing with a crisis on two fronts, one in Puerto Rico, the other in Florida.

**Topics:** weather, storm-disaster, human-interest, community-and-society, puerto-rico, united-states

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