

We Are All Puerto Rico

While most organizations are aware of the crisis in Puerto Rico, many may not be up-to-date on the current situation and needs on the island. Groups, like yours, are natural allies that can share information with your constituencies and members and expand political support for the over 3 million U.S. citizens living on the island through your extensive and powerful networks.

The speed at which civil society groups were able to react and assist Puerto Rico, in some cases within days and weeks ahead of FEMA and other government disaster response agencies, spell out the crucial role you have played and the difference you can still make in Puerto Rico's recovery. That role is no less important when it comes to advocating for the long-term policy changes needed for Puerto Rico to have a sustainable future.

Here are a few examples of how the current situation in Puerto Rico aligns with your organizational mission and interests, ideas about organizations that you can connect with, and how to explain why your members and communities should be interested in Puerto Rico's cause.

HOW DOES PUERTO RICO FIT INTO YOUR MISSION?

Climate and Environmental Justice Groups

The devastation of the hurricanes in Puerto Rico and the severe climate changes elsewhere are impacting the natural environment and creating a whole new population of climate refugees within the United States and across the world. Over [200,000 fled](#) the island with most heading to U.S. states (some temporarily) after Hurricane Maria hit in September 2017.

- Puerto Rico has a historic opportunity to lead the way in developing a resilient energy grid that is sustainable and helps the U.S. meet its climate goals and to seek equitable solutions to decades of environmental harm to low-income communities. In fact, Puerto Rico has its [own aggressive climate goals](#) that should be encouraged and supported to come to fruition. The [largest grant](#) in FEMA history has been awarded to Puerto Rico for rebuilding the energy grid; climate and EJ groups must ensure this money and this historic opportunity is used to build a future based on renewable energy and is not squandered by recreating unsustainable and polluting energy reliance on fossil fuels.
- Hurricanes Irma and Maria severely impacted local drinking water and the surrounding environment. In the aftermath of the disaster, people [resorted to drinking](#) potentially contaminated water from those sites.
- Flooding and loss of coastal habitat pose major [conservation concerns](#) on the island.
- Puerto Rico faces some unique challenges when it comes to toxic hazards [as a large portion of the waste on the island comes](#) from its once-booming pharmaceutical industry.

- Some of the energy production methods in Puerto Rico are also [causing toxic and environmental hazards](#) – not only to the island but to the states as well. For example, the company AES operates a coal plant that [dumped coal ash](#) on the island until protesters and activists succeeded in banning it in 2017. Afterward, AES tried to unload toxic ash in [St. Cloud, FL](#) but was [stopped](#) by community members. [The ashes were then sent to South Georgia.](#)
- Environmental groups should also be concerned about the [fast-tracking mechanism](#), which allows the unelected Fiscal Board to designate certain infrastructure projects they deem “critical” to be able to avoid complying with certain environmental regulations. This sets a dangerous precedent for future policies that could apply to cities, counties, and other jurisdictions across the continental U.S.
- The [toxic legacy of U.S. Navy bombing](#) and other military practice exercises in the island municipalities of Vieques and Culebra have left generations of Puerto Ricans with a legacy of [disease](#) and environmental contamination for which the U.S. government has a moral responsibility. The [slow cleanup](#) and [closure of medical facilities](#) following Maria create a human rights health care issue that must be urgently addressed.

Reproductive, Women's, and LGBTQ+ Rights

Reproductive, gender and LGBTQ+ rights are frequently under political attack in Puerto Rico. Civil and human rights must support the fight for equality and choice in Puerto Rico. Domestic violence has also risen to crisis proportions on the island.

- With the [overturning of Dobbs](#), some protections that Puerto Ricans once counted on have become more uncertain. Puerto Rico's legislature is currently considering anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-choice bills. For example:
 - 5 anti-choice [bills](#) have recently been debated (On June 21, 2022, the Puerto Rico Senate [passed](#) SB 693 to limit a woman's right to choose).
 - A bill to ban conversion therapy, which is considered by the U.N. to be a form of torture, [was blocked](#) by a Senate committee in May 2022.
 - [Protests](#) demanding action to address gender violence and femicide led to a [declaration of a state of emergency](#) in 2021.

Groups that Care About Nutrition, Housing, Health, and Children

Many groups across the United States that care about a range of human needs, have also joined in the fight to ensure that the residents of Puerto Rico have access to adequate nutrition, affordable housing, and comprehensive healthcare.

- Inspired by Jewish values and ideals, [Mazon](#), a Jewish Response to Hunger, has taken on nutritional inequity in Puerto Rico, consistently sharing detailed policy information with its members and [advocating](#) for increased nutrition funding for the island. For an explainer about food insecurity and inequities in Puerto Rico, watch [Mazon's Insider Briefing Series — Addressing Food Insecurity in Puerto Rico](#) (May 12, 2022).
- The [National Low Income Housing Coalition](#) (NLIHC) has also been a steadfast ally of Puerto Rico through its work with the [National Disaster Housing Recovery Coalition](#) which focuses on ensuring that the federal government prioritizes the housing needs of low-income survivors. Their work with Puerto Rico includes convening a working group on disaster housing issues in Puerto Rico, working closely with local housing legal and community advocates; [expressing their concern](#) with FEMA's Individual Assistance on the island, and [calling on Congress](#) to ensure that Puerto Rican people have the power to determine and direct their own recovery, and [hosting panels](#) to discuss the impact Hurricane Maria had on children. They have also shed light on the reasons FEMA [application denials](#) were so high.
- [The Coalition on Human Needs](#) has been advocating for Puerto Rican children affected by Hurricane Maria by shedding light [on the problems they are facing](#), providing updates on the matter, and elevating the issue in front of stakeholders.

Social Justice and Civil Rights Groups

Those who fight for justice and against discrimination need to educate themselves about the structural inequities, now playing out in ongoing reconstruction and rebuilding efforts, in order to advocate on behalf of communities impacted by Maria, and ensure the same concern is shown for all affected by disasters, no matter their skin tone, language, geographic location or economic status.

- Numerous [studies](#) concluded that the federal government's response to Hurricane Maria and Irma was [slower](#) and less generous than in other U.S. jurisdictions affected by disasters.
- President Trump [openly complained](#) about providing aid to Puerto Rico, going so far as suggesting trading Puerto Rico for [Greenland](#). He was widely criticized for his [discriminatory remarks](#) and [disparate treatment](#) of U.S. citizens in Puerto Rico.
- Social justice and civil rights groups care about the equitable treatment of marginalized groups. Due to Puerto Rico's unique status with the United States, Puerto Ricans on the island are discriminated against and are denied full federal anti-poverty programs. This is thanks to a series of racist Supreme Court cases called the [Insular Cases](#).

Organized Labor

Organized labor was [a driving force](#) in the immediate recovery in Puerto Rico. Besides being on the front lines of delivering supplies, and rebuilding infrastructure they have been working with their Puerto Rican members on the mainland and in Puerto Rico [to demand a just economic recovery](#). Labor can use its influence with elected officials/decision makers by working in solidarity with their brothers and sisters in Puerto Rico to prevent undermining of labor laws and support efforts to rebuild and protect U.S. citizens living in Puerto Rico.

- The [PROMESA](#) federal law, passed by Congress, set a dangerous precedent in Puerto Rico for undermining labor organizing and was opposed by many unions. It allows the Financial Oversight and Management Board (FOMB) and the Governor of Puerto Rico to [lower the minimum wage to \\$4.25 an hour](#) for workers younger than 26 years of age. It also empowers a "revitalization coordinator" to designate "critical infrastructure" projects that can be approved on a fast track basis, and thus avoid compliance with several environmental, labor, and other regulations. The FOMB has continually pushed for undercutting labor rights, recently threatening to [annul a law](#) partially restoring those rights. The board's push for the LUMA Energy privatization scheme also led to the end of the UTIER electrical workers union.

- Many labor organizations have Puerto Rican members who are active within their leadership and many members acted as a lifeline right after Hurricane Maria. Besides providing basic emergency supplies, volunteers from SEIU, National Nurses United, and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), among others, were key in life-saving relief efforts in Puerto Rico days after Maria. Many like AFT and the Labor Council for Latin American Advancement (LCLAA), have continued their commitment to assist in rebuilding and advocating for policy changes.
- Organized labor has a special understanding that injustice towards one group or class of people is a threat to all people. Their experience in organizing and deployment of resources is the perfect partnership to help Puerto Rico as it moves toward its recovery and economic growth.
- Organized labor groups are engaged in civic participation and organizing with

Latino Groups

- Puerto Ricans are the second largest Latino group in our nation at approximately 6 million. They have been engaged, at the forefront of fighting for the rights, well-being, and empowerment of Latinos and others all across our nation. In New York City, Puerto Ricans are seen as pioneers who paved the way for other Latino groups to enjoy rights they would not be able to exercise were it not for the struggles the Puerto Rican community waged for decades. [LatinoJustice PRLDEF](#), for example, started as a Puerto Rican-focused organization and is now among the most prominent national Latino legal defense funds fighting for immigrant rights, as well as the rights of Hurricane Maria evacuees and others.
- Efforts to divide DREAMers from Puerto Ricans in Congressional legislation that forced Members of Congress to choose between hurricane relief for Puerto Rico and other affected jurisdictions and avoiding the termination of DACA show how Latinos need to unite and not allow others to divide them. These efforts to divide us were rejected by the Puerto Rican members of Congress, and the overwhelming majority of Hispanic Congressional members.

African-American Groups

From Hurricanes Katrina to Irma and Maria, systemic racism and discrimination in disaster response have resulted in needless deaths and slow economic recoveries in historically marginalized communities like New Orleans and Puerto Rico.

- Puerto Rican culture is strongly influenced by its Afro-Latino roots. In fact, Puerto Ricans' views on race have been shifting. The 2020 Census reflected an [80% drop](#) in the number of Puerto Ricans who identified as white.
- Most of the population has African ancestry, often mixed with indigenous Taíno and/or European heritage. Puerto Ricans come in all shapes, sizes, and colors.
- Discriminatory treatment of Puerto Ricans, and its outcomes, is similar to that experienced by other communities of color in the U.S. who have faced [systemic inequalities](#) - rooted in racism - in areas like [housing](#), [healthcare](#), and the [environment](#).
- [Arturo Alfonso Schomburg](#), who was Puerto Rican of African and German descent, was a writer, historian, activist, and cultural promoter. Schomburg was born in Puerto Rico and moved to New York City where he founded several organizations focused on fighting for the civil rights of Puerto Ricans and African Americans. His work contributed to founding the [Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture](#).

Teacher's Groups

In spite of protests from parents, teachers, and local communities, Puerto Rico has closed 673 schools since 2007, [presenting serious harm to the students and communities who rely on them, while failing to deliver the financial savings used to justify their closure](#). Many others simply never reopened after the hurricanes.

- Tens of thousands of students and teachers have been displaced. Teachers in Puerto Rico are chronically underpaid. This combination of circumstances has caused an [exodus](#) that has also aggravated educational conditions for students in public schools. Thanks to President Biden's pandemic relief money, teachers on the island received a [pay raise](#) for the first time in ten years. The pay bump amounts to \$1,000 a month or a 30% increase for the average teacher in Puerto Rico.

- [The American Federation of Teachers](#) (AFT) and the *Asociación de Maestros de Puerto Rico* (AMPR) were active in recovery efforts following Hurricane Maria hit. Schools served as vital points for shelter, distribution of supplies, and centers of recovery in the weeks after Hurricane Maria. AFT and AMPR, in partnership with Hispanic Federation and various non-profits, [raised more than \\$2 million to purchase water filters](#) that were delivered to schools and communities in need of clean water.
- AMPR teachers were [cleaning and repairing schools across Puerto Rico](#) before even FEMA had landed in their cities. With supplies sent from mainland unions and charities, teachers were cleaning classrooms and getting lunchrooms ready to give kids sanctuary to recover and learn.

Faith-Based Organizations

[Faith-based institutions are often on the front lines](#) of serving populations in need of assistance. These organizations can and should use their moral authority to call on Members of Congress and others, to be responsive to the needs of Puerto Ricans during times of tremendous hardship and tragedy. They can use their platforms to ensure Puerto Rico's people are not forgotten, such as through newsletters, sign-on letters, sermons, etc.

- [Jubilee USA](#) – a coalition of religious, development, and advocacy groups – has been at the forefront in the [fight for global debt relief](#) for poor countries, budget relief, and the auditing of the debt in Puerto Rico. Similar to Jubilee USA, other faith-based groups believe that their religious values demand that they fight inequality in order to defend the most vulnerable.
- Even if the need for emergency supplies has passed, the process of rebuilding remains a long-term proposition. Many faith-based institutions have Puerto Rican parishioners with leadership/membership on the mainland who care and are ready and willing to assist the Puerto Rican community on the island from their own parish.

HERE ARE JUST A FEW EXAMPLES OF WAYS TO ENGAGE YOUR MEMBERSHIP:

- Create opportunities to educate your members about the issues being faced in Puerto Rico and show how they align with your group's priorities (invite a speaker from *TakeAction4PR* campaign at info@TakeActionPR.org).
- Share information about how your membership can help using organizational newsletters or social media.
- Share literature/handouts at organizational meetings.
- Have your organization's leadership and members reach out to their Members of Congress and ask them to assist Puerto Rico. (include one or more of the "asks" we include in the [2022 Policy Asks section of this toolkit](#)).
- Ask them to join in a Congressional Call-In Day, or distribute a petition tailored to your issue (see *Legislation Your Member of Congress Should Support* [here](#)).
- Ask members to author or co-author an op-ed to educate the public and demonstrate there is broad support for Puerto Rico.