

HHS
EMPOWER
PROGRAM

EARTHQUAKES IN PUERTO RICO

Why was the HHS emPOWER Program needed?

In January 2020, Puerto Rico faced multiple earthquakes of extreme magnitudes across several municipalities, including Ponce, Guánica, Guayanilla, Peñuelas, Yauco, and others, threatening the lives of thousands of at-risk individuals. The Puerto Rico Department of Health (PRDOH), having used the HHS emPOWER Emergency Planning De-identified Dataset, in partnership with emergency managers, to assess the locations of vulnerable populations in advance of emergencies as part of a hazard vulnerability assessment, quickly requested the restricted HHS emPOWER Emergency Response Outreach Individual Dataset (emPOWER Response Outreach Dataset) to support targeted response outreach activities. PRDOH established and led teams that, using the emPOWER data, conducted outreach wellness visits to at-risk individuals in the impacted areas to provide critical health, behavioral health, hygiene, human services and housing, and other federal assistance program informational resources and contact information.

How were the HHS emPOWER Program Tools used?

Coordination of Response Partners: During January and February 2020, PRDOH used the emPOWER Response Outreach Dataset to identify and prioritize the homes of 262 individuals who depend on oxygen-providing durable medical equipment and tanks and were adversely impacted by the severe earthquakes. PRDOH directed community outreach teams made up of about 45 PRDOH officials, Medical Reserve Corps (MRC) volunteers, non-governmental organizations (NGO), and local nursing school students to conduct wellness checks to at-risk residents across five municipalities.

Wellness Checks: While conducting wellness checks using the emPOWER data, PRDOH outreach teams reached 166 at-risk individuals, with several of the remaining individuals having relocated to a family member's home or a shelter, or evacuating the island entirely. When teams contacted individuals, they asked about specific health needs, shared informational materials covering hygiene and behavioral health practices and resources (e.g., information on hand washing and the Puerto Rico Administration of Mental Health and Anti-Addiction Services PAS hotline), and referred individuals to behavioral health services if needed. The teams also provided a telephone directory with contact information for additional health services, Emergency Prescription Assistance Program (EPAP) and Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) assistance programs, and the MRC, referred individuals to NGOs and the University of Puerto Rico Assistive Technology Program for wheelchair assistance, and supplied mosquito repellent.

Quick Facts

Date: January to February 2020

Location: Puerto Rico

**Tool(s) used:**

- emPOWER Emergency Planning De-identified Dataset
- emPOWER Emergency Response Outreach Individual Dataset

Stage(s) of the Emergency Management Cycle:

- Response
- Recovery
- Mitigation

**Partners**

- University of Puerto Rico Assistive Technology Program
- MRC Volunteers
- Direct Relief
- National University College Nursing Students

What was the impact of the HHS emPOWER Program?

After the earthquakes, PRDOH used emPOWER data to quickly foster partnerships and identify and deploy assets to protect the health of its at-risk population with limited resources. PRDOH is continuing to expand partnerships with health care providers, nursing schools, and NGOs to enhance integration and capacity to support at-risk population needs in advance of future incidents, emergencies, or disasters.

What's Next?

PRDOH is currently working across their agencies and partners to identify agency staff, municipal emergency management personnel, and others to join and/or lead emergency response outreach teams and work to train these individuals and teams in advance of the next disaster.