

DISASTER RECOVERY HURRICANE IRMA - CUBA 2018-2019 Final Report

- **Hurricane Irma**

Hurricane Irma, a category 5 storm and the fifth strongest Atlantic hurricane on record, hit Cuba on September 7th of 2017. The storm impacted about 90% of the country, villages were destroyed and people were left homeless across several provinces, with 7 municipalities suffering the highest impact. Infrastructure was damaged throughout the hurricane zone, and as a result more than 500,000 people were affected.

With over 72 hours of constant winds, rain and seawater surge impacting the island, the hurricane caused severe flooding and tidal waves leaving 10.5 million people under the Hurricane Alarm Phase, over 2 million of whom were evacuated. Despite Cuba's typical natural disaster preparedness, due to the severity of the storm at least 10 lives were lost.

- **Global Links' Disaster Response**

Global Links worked at the request of and in collaboration with the Pan American Health Organization/World Health Organization (PAHO/WHO), and the Ministry of Public Health (MINSAP) to identify medium- and long-term recovery efforts of Cuba's health-related needs, following the destruction of Hurricane Irma. Shipments of medical equipment, furnishings and supplies were provided to 5 reference and teaching hospitals located in areas devastated by the hurricane, promoting a sustainable and community-based approach to medical relief and reconstruction, by empowering highly-trained healthcare professionals and students already working in these hospitals.

Launching a large-scale recovery program following a major disaster takes a commitment of financial and human resources and a concerted multi pronged effort to address short-term requirements, develop a policy and institutional framework, design a financing strategy, and put implementation arrangements in place.

Global Links is one of only a few U.S. charities licensed by the Department of Commerce to work in Cuba and is the single largest donor of medical aid to Cuba from the United States. Aid is received and distributed to health institutions by the PAHO/WHO office in Havana and the Cuban Ministry of Health, after extensive meetings and site visits to select appropriate recipient institutions.

By employing our resources and connections to focus on long-term recovery efforts and restoring and rebuilding capacity of the healthcare system, we developed a program in collaboration with our partners at PAHO/WHO and MINSAP, along with financial support from PAHO/WHO, the ELMA Foundation and Medical Education Cooperation with Cuba (MEDICC) to strengthen the capacity of five provincial reference and teaching hospitals which serve those communities which were most harshly affected by the hurricane.

Even before the rain subsided, Global Links activated the disaster response team in our office, and initiated communication with PAHO/WHO Cuba who worked with the Ministry of Health carefully assessing all damage and planning the recovery response needed in the health sector.

According to PAHO/WHO, there was an urgent need to repair non-functional essential health facilities and satellite warehouses housing medical supplies, however these actions were delayed due to lack of funding and materials. Thus, the health sector gave priority to the reconstruction – rehabilitation and maintenance of partially and fully-damaged health facilities in the hurricane affected provinces, along with procurement and distribution of equipment, drugs and other key supplies required for the effective functioning of the health services in these areas. Global Links was asked to focus on the areas most affected by the hurricane including Villa Clara, Santi Spiritus, Ciego de Avila, Holguin and Camaguey, and sent containers to each of the five teaching and reference hospitals in these areas.



Each hospital received two 40’ containers of medical furnishings, primary care equipment, hospital supplies, and surgical instruments to cover elevated demand post-disaster, replenish resources and/or remodel damaged hospital units. With an average value of over \$89,000 per container, the total value of donated materials exceeded \$US 890,000.

- **Continuous Efforts and Collaboration**

In March of 2019, Global Links staff performed monitoring and evaluation visits to each of the 5 beneficiary hospitals to verify the receipt and use of the items as well as gather feedback on the utility of certain materials and collect information about outstanding needs. From conversations with hospital staff, Global Links observed a high level of satisfaction (average of 90-100%) with the donated materials, both in terms of relevance, quality and utility. Consumable supplies that were previously being washed and reused (like gloves) were replenished and the hospitals were able to direct their resources to cover other needs, specifically the repair of the physical structures of the hospital buildings damaged in the hurricane.

Despite the materials donated in 2017-2018, the need remains high throughout Cuba's public healthcare system. Increased tightening of the U.S. embargo and travel restrictions imposed by the current U.S. administration, combined with a reduction of oil shipments from Venezuela which is Cuba's main fuel source, are contributing to a national crisis situation. Many medical products are not manufactured in Cuba and with less ability to purchase on the international market, medical supplies are not available, are in dangerously short supply or staff must continue to wash and reuse items that are meant for single-use.

Global Links remains committed to continue collaborating with PAHO/WHO and MINSAP in supporting the Public Health Sector in Cuba. Late last year we received final approval of an agreement for 2020 in which Global Links will support the work of PAHO/WHO in several different situations. The first is recovery and rebuilding the capacity of the healthcare facilities damaged by a freak tornado in the January 2019 that hit neighborhoods in Havana, including a maternity hospital. The second is to provide additional support to the hospital in Remedios, which suffered more damage than the other four hospitals during Irma and is still struggling to regain capacity. Other components to our work in 2020 include supporting the new center for children with disabilities in Havana and centers for seniors.

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