HOW CAN GRANT PROGRAMS PREPARE FOR NATURAL DISASTERS?

Incidences of natural disasters have been on the rise, with recorded changes in air temperature, wind patterns and sea surface temperatures; unpredictable weather patterns can directly and indirectly affect business operations around the globe. This resource illustrates how two Ready to Work (RTW) Grantees, Puerto Rico Technoeconomic Corridor (Puerto Rico) and San Jacinto Community College (Pasadena, TX), were confronted with a natural disaster and steps they took to get their grant program back on track. We conducted extensive interviews with both grantees for in-depth information on how they prepared, managed, and proceeded after a hurricane struck their service areas. This technical assistance (TA) resource document builds on the information both grantees shared in the Lessons Learned & Promising Practices webinar on October 23, 2018.

DIRECT IMPACT

PUERTO RICO TECHNOECONOMIC CORRIDOR, PUERTO RICO

On September 4, 2017, Puerto Rico braced for the pass of Hurricane Irma and although it never made landfall, its winds left 65 percent of the island without water and/or power. Government agencies, businesses and schools were closed for a week. A few weeks later, on September 20, 2017, Maria – a Category 5 hurricane – made landfall and caused a total collapse of the island’s infrastructure.

SAN JACINTO COMMUNITY COLLEGE, PASADENA, TX

Harvey, a Category 3 hurricane, touched down in the Houston area on August 25, 2017, bringing 50 inches of rainfall right before their training began. Several students dropped out of their classes or were unable to begin their training due to flooded homes or lost vehicles. Ten of the courses were either postponed or delayed.
What effects did the Hurricanes have on your grant activities?

**Puerto Rico:** The whole island lacked power and communication. People learned things through word of mouth. Radio became a major way to convey or relay information. We visited the radio station and made a list of information to share. It took two to three weeks for our employees to begin meeting again – everything stopped for the first three weeks. By the beginning of the third week, key files were gathered from our facilities and available personnel resumed operations focusing on reaching participants. By the fourth week, our building regained power and we moved back in. By the sixth week, we finally received internet access and resumed full operations.

**San Jacinto:** The storm hit a week before classes started and some training classes were delayed for up to two weeks. Several local companies were forced to close due to precautionary measures or unforeseeable circumstances. Once classes were up and running, thirty (30) participants did not return due to home relocation, no transportation, obtained temporary employment, and some were not reachable.

How do you maintain/regain contact with grant participants and staff after a disaster?

**Puerto Rico:** We left notes on doors asking people to notify us if they were okay. We also left notebooks in different places (ex. the American Job Center) so people could leave messages about their status. Because radio was the only means of communication, we broadcasted the location of the notebooks. The notebook idea was devised after the hurricane; prior to that no one ever thought a hurricane would be this bad.

We lost contact with around 20 percent of the workers enrolled prior to the hurricanes mainly due to their migration to the continental U.S. When communication services were restored, people used prepaid cell phones to call friends and family on the mainland. We continued to provide support to our former participants that left the island to the U.S., through connecting them to American Job Centers.

**San Jacinto:** During the storm, phone and email contact was maintained with the grant team as well as our subrecipients. We did notice an overall drop in applications a month after the hurricane. We contributed this to a shift in priorities for many potential candidates who might have taken on extra work to pay for unexpected expenses after their homes and cars were damaged.

How did you continue to engage employer partners after a disaster?

**Puerto Rico:** We developed an employer reconnection plan. We coordinated a series of visits to the partners to inquire what their operational state and to perform an assessment of their needs as a result of the hurricane. We rallied the needs of industry to government agencies, so employers could resume operating as soon as possible. We acted as the glue (connector) between participants, employer partners and government agencies.
San Jacinto: We held a luncheon for employers and continued our employer advisory meetings. We kept in constant communication.

What role do partnerships play in disaster preparation and recovery?

Puerto Rico: We reached out to our partners and shared and exchanged services as needed. Some partners used our facilities because we had power.

San Jacinto: We received emails from several non-profit agencies about services provided for those affected by the storm. Those emails were sent to the grant participants.

What “Supportive Services” did you provide your participants?

Puerto Rico: We relayed information to the military, so individuals could get food and supplies. We became a point of contact for information and support since we did not have food, water, and supplies to share.

San Jacinto: There were special FEMA grants that were given to participants. The Red Cross also offered assistance to qualified people. Churches provided toiletries and free meals. We assisted with gas or work support if they were in our trainings. We also provided resume assistance and sent weekly job openings as well as meet monthly for our job clubs.

What is the status of the H-1B RTW grant now?

Puerto Rico: We are fully operational and are coordinating and executing island-wide outreach and placement events. Our strategy now focuses on completing training activities and strengthening our partnerships with employers to meet and hopefully exceed our job placement goals.

San Jacinto: For most participants, partners, and grant staff, the impact of the grant lasted from a few weeks to a few months. We have resumed all grant activities. Since the hurricane, there has been a drop-in attendance at employer advisory committee meetings. Employers may be too busy to take the time to attend or they may still be recovering from the hurricane. With the end of the grant near, the outside support is low.
What are the biggest lessons you have learned about preparing your grant program for a natural disaster and recovering from it?

Puerto Rico: Community and partner engagement is very important. It is important to have a business continuity plan. The business continuity plan is all the preparation a business has to do to manage a major event such as a natural disaster or a bomb scare. It’s a larger scale emergency preparation plan. We also have a business reconnection plan. We understand that it is very important to appoint a strong and experienced leadership team, so we can establish very integrated governance between our program, the public, and everyone that wants to support the workers that we are serving (i.e. Government agencies and other funders). In terms of strategic focus, we are developing a very strong framework for prioritizing recovery needs so we can use that as a guide and roll it out faster after a major disaster. We are also partnering with our employers for sustainability strategies and business continuity strategies.

San Jacinto: Have everyone’s phone numbers so you can contact them as well as a website with information. Also, have a place to report to when a disaster strikes.

TIPS TO PREPARE FOR EMERGENCIES

- **Set up an emergency response plan and train employees how to carry it out.** Make sure employees know whom to notify about the disaster and what measures to take to preserve life and limit property losses.

- **Write out each step of the plan and assign responsibilities to employees in clear and simple language.** Practice the procedures set out in the emergency response plan with regular, scheduled drills.

- **Compile a list of important phone numbers and addresses.** Make sure you can get in touch with key individuals after the disaster. The list should include local and state emergency management agencies, major clients, contractors, suppliers, realtors, financial institutions, insurance agents and insurance company claim representatives.

- **Decide on a communications strategy to prevent loss of customers.** Contact clients by phone, email or regular mail.

- **Back up your data.** Data should be backed up daily to ensure that business can go on as usual without inconveniencing customers or interrupting operations.