

FEMA Supports Accessible Tourism as Part of the Island's Recovery

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Guaynabo, Puerto Rico – The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) initiated the first federal and state project in Puerto Rico to eliminate accessibility barriers and help create tourism with greater equity and inclusion for people with functional diversity.

This initiative, created by FEMA's team of advisors from the Disability Integration (DI) office, has impacted several municipalities with strategies such as the installation of signs and menus in Braille writing, tour guides qualified in sign language, removable ramps to adapt them to various facilities, and aquatic and floating wheelchairs for use in beaches and water parks, among many other options.

In addition, the DI team provides suggestions to identify grants and recovery funds that include measures so that survivors with disabilities and access and functional needs can enjoy tourism activities under the same conditions.

“The recovery of Puerto Rico is very broad and goes beyond the allocation of funds for reconstruction work. The ongoing efforts to help the island recover provide the opportunity of collaborating with the government in this type of initiative for the equal benefit of all,” said FEMA’s Federal Disaster Recovery Coordinator in Puerto Rico, José G. Baquero.

In order to have a greater impact and promote joint efforts, FEMA worked with the Puerto Rico Tourism Company and the Puerto Rico Destination Management Organization, with the purpose of analyzing statistics about tourism economy and reaffirmed that improving accessibility strengthens the results in this industry.

Carlos Mercado Santiago, Executive Director of the Puerto Rico Tourism Company, stated that one of the main goals aligned with the vision of the Government of Puerto Rico is to encourage inclusive and accessible tourism. “As part of the initiatives that we have been doing in that direction, we are pleased to



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join FEMA's efforts to educate and create awareness within our tourism entrepreneurs, organizations and communities in all of the Island's municipalities," said Mercado.

Currently, DI continues to work directly with the municipalities and agencies to provide guidance on the importance of accessibility, its inclusive benefits and alternatives to acquire funding that make accessibility possible. Also, statistics of the population census are provided that identify the communities with disabilities in each municipality as an element to visualize how can they improve their inclusion alternatives.

In Ponce, the Director the Municipality's Tourism Development Company, Ivan "Yuye" Rodríguez, said that the subjects of accessibility and inclusion within the Mayor's work plan and public policy are of great importance. "Workshops like the one we received about Accessible and Inclusive Tourism, serve as a guide to develop strategies and achieve social cohesion while we work to boost economic development and tourism in our city, without losing focus on the general community's wellbeing."

Furthermore, these measures also support other areas such as sports tourism, as mentioned by Jaime Rosado Villa, father of a young sports enthusiast who, during the last 10 years, has participated in various 5K races with his walker.

"In 2018, he walked two and a half miles at the Miami Marathon, on December 2020, he walked 21 kilometers in 30 days. This year, due to the pandemic, the project of doing sports tourism was born with races that go through all the municipalities and the beauties of our country so that we all have the opportunity to enjoy what Puerto Rico offers as a tourist destination," Rosado Villa said about his athlete son's experience.

The Accessible and Inclusive Tourism Project began to develop in 2018. During that year, FEMA had the opportunity to participate in the assessments of various public facilities in Puerto Rico, and since February 2018 it has worked with different municipalities, like Aguadilla, Arecibo, Bayamón, Isabela, Maunabo, Ponce and San Juan with the goal of providing guidance on accessible tourism.

Organizations interested in receiving orientations may email jose.carorivera@fema.dhs.gov and/or fatmee.lopeztorres@fema.dhs.gov.



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