

Community liaisons bridge gaps in power restoration

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Jasmine Day, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

In the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, U.S. Army Maj. Alexander Walker has served as a human bridge linking the task force charged with restoring power in Puerto Rico to citizens greatly in need of electricity. As an engineer officer since 2006, Walker is accustomed to construction and demolition tasks under combat conditions, building structures, and designing civil works. In his newer role as a community liaison, what Walker builds now are relationships.

The prerequisites for the job are a sincere desire to work closely with local communities to gain insight into the needs of citizens and a commitment to transparency, frequent communication, and personal interaction with local leaders, explained Walker, who was born in Rio Grande, Puerto Rico. He usually serves as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) Jacksonville District Deputy Commander for the Antilles Office and is responsible for the efficiency, effectiveness, and safety of personnel, projects, and programs in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. When Hurricane Maria pummeled the Antilles and Leeward Islands, Walker knew it would not be business as usual. The severity of damage along with Puerto Rico's location, mountainous terrain, poor state of its power grid, even before the hurricane, and restoration materiel shortages due to a wave of storms hitting in close succession prior to Maria meant recovery could not proceed swiftly or easily. USACE, under a mission assignment from FEMA, deployed hundreds of first responders to demolish damaged structures, provide temporary, protective tarps for exposed roofs, and dispose of debris. FEMA also directed USACE to provide temporary emergency power to critical facilities and later assigned USACE the largest emergency power restoration mission in U.S. history, in support of the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority.

USACE Jacksonville District Commander Col. Jason A. Kirk, the commander of Task Force Power Restoration, assembled a team of bilingual (English and Spanish) science and engineering professionals, with a passion for public



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participation, to serve as community liaisons where restoration projects are underway. He knew the benefits of maintaining a cadre of liaison officers from his experiences during contingency operations where no one entity could legitimately solve complex problems alone. Instead, many partners with varied perspectives tackled complex problems together.

In addition to Walker, current members of the community liaison team include U.S. Army Reserve Capt. Andre Carr, an engineer officer with 18 years of experience in project management and construction, and Jose Cedeno-Maldonado, a biologist with 25 years of experience in environmental compliance and natural resources management.

“Task Force Power Restoration community liaisons are that all-important human link between our task force that is working hard to deliver electricity safely and urgently, and those community leaders who represent the concerns of local citizens,” said Kirk. “By coordinating with the PREPA (Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority) Regional/District Engineers, FEMA Branch/Division Chiefs, and the Regional Electric Industry Management Teams, our liaisons have served an important information fusion role to provide critical progress updates and ultimately increase trust among the citizens for whom we’re working.”

Jess Cary, a realty specialist with the USACE Nashville District, currently working on power restoration in Puerto Rico, described how former community liaison, Jose Garcia, a civil engineer, also with the Nashville District, was vital in rapidly securing the required signature for a crucial lease to a municipal facility needed to stage equipment required for power restoration efforts.

“With just one hour’s notice, Jose hopped in the jeep with me and directed me to the (Arecibo) mayor’s office. Although Mayor Molina was on the mainland, his deputy had permission to sign. Jose explained the urgency of the situation and got the necessary signature on the same day we requested it. I could not have accomplished that alone. As a community liaison, Jose has made those local connections that are especially important during times of need.”

Mayor of Orocovis Jesús “Gardi” Colón Berlingeri also appreciates the service of community liaisons.



“Since Jose (Cedeno-Maldonado) has been meeting with us, communication has been much better and more reliable; sharing information has been much better and faster,” Berlingeri said.

Community liaisons keep municipalities informed about power restoration efforts in a timely manner by frequently providing them data, including schedules and descriptions of where crews will be working and what they will be doing. They meet with mayors and their staffs to listen to their questions, concerns, and recommendations then bring back that information to task force leadership for further action. The liaisons also coordinate closely with PREPA district engineers and regional administrators to provide them updates on the progress of the portion of power restoration work that is conducted by USACE. PREPA engineers and administrators also share updates on the progress PREPA is making on the portion of power restoration work that is conducted by them.

Cedeno-Maldonado was born and raised in Puerto Rico. Although he’s lived and worked on the mainland, he and most of his family still reside in Puerto Rico and he intends to remain on the island for the rest of his life, he said. Like many other Hurricane Maria survivors, several weeks passed before utilities, including electricity, were restored to his home. Given the duties required of him as a regulatory biologist, Cedeno-Maldonado was well suited for the role of community liaison. He has listened to the feedback of thousands of concerned citizens on hundreds of projects concerning wetlands, streams, and other waters that are regulated by federal law. He said he has become adept at respecting a wide variety of perspectives while protecting regulated water resources and allowing reasonable development through fair and balanced decisions.

“Providing commanders a field perspective that has been informed by what I’m seeing and hearing from people who live in the regions I serve enables the task force to do a better job at turning the lights on,” said Cedeno-Maldonado. “I believe I have served to develop mutual respect and understanding between the task force, mayors, other agencies, and citizens.”

Carr, a resident of Houston, Texas, who will return to Texas after his tour in Puerto Rico, hopes his actions set the tone for what will continue to be a good relationship between the USACE and municipalities.



“Long after I’m gone and the island has recovered from Maria, USACE will still have to work with local leaders on civil works projects for flood risk reduction, military construction, and navigation, so it’s crucial to maintain good relationships with local communities,” said Carr. “I’ve had the opportunity to do something I care deeply about: helping people understand each other better and working together toward the shared goal of turning the lights on for the people of Puerto Rico.”

Walker pointed out that the 2018 Atlantic Hurricane Season begins June 1. Emergency managers urge people to prepare for disasters by developing a preparedness plan that includes knowing where to go if you are ordered to evacuate, maintaining an emergency preparedness kit, and establishing a family emergency communication plan. More information about preparing for disasters is available at <https://www.ready.gov/>

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