



A104 Puerto Rico Forensic Science Project: The Puerto Rico Forensic Services Perspective

Matthew J. Gamette, MS, Idaho State Police Forensic Services, Meridian, ID 83642*

Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the operational and logistical challenges a forensic laboratory may face after a massive natural disaster or significant economic catastrophe and key aspects in order to overcome the situation. Attendees will be asked to consider how they might provide assistance in Puerto Rico or other places that might need forensic science assistance. Attendees will be asked to consider disaster planning or recovery models that consider forensic science operations. Attendees will take away thoughts regarding how to accept help effectively in an emergency situation and will learn how critical forensic science operations are to a state or territory criminal justice process.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by showing how the critical lessons learned from this project can provide a head start in emergency preparedness and volunteerism efforts all over the world. Practitioners will learn what happens in worst-case scenario situations, and where they may be able to reach out for help. Forensic science leaders who are being asked to focus more on risk mitigation as part of the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) 17025:2017 will learn risk factors they may not be considering in their continuation of operations plans. Right now, the forensic science community is loosely organized for emergency situation response, and planners should consider the increase in natural disasters that impact forensic science service providers each year.

Puerto Rico's Negociado de Ciencias Forenses (in English, Forensic Science Bureau, or "FSB") and Puerto Rico Department of Public Safety (PR DPS) signed a Memorandum Of Understanding (MOU) with the American Society of Crime Laboratory Directors (ASCLD) and National Association of Attorneys General (NAAG) to receive professional volunteer help in recovering from Hurricane Maria. The Puerto Rico FSB has benefited in many ways from the generosity of many volunteer professional forensic scientists, laboratory directors, forensic pathologists, autopsy technicians, attorneys, and other experts from around the continental United States.

Background of the Puerto Rico Forensic Science Project: The FSB has experienced severe hardships in the past several years. While most are aware of a series of devastating hurricanes that hit the island, many are not aware of the government financial issues that have led to federally overseen bankruptcy of the island and Puerto Rico government restructuring. The hurricanes did millions of dollars in damage to the FSB facility, eliminated sustainable power and air conditioning to the building, and damaged a majority of the instrumentation and equipment. The Medical Examiner Office (MEO) was overwhelmed with work due to victims from and related to the hurricane, deaths from a high crime rate, and restrictive autopsy laws and policies. In addition, many of the FSB employees left the island in the wake of the hurricanes to take higher paying jobs in laboratories on the continental United States. Due to government restructuring from the bankruptcy, almost overnight FSB went from being an independently operating forensic science laboratory and MEO to being part of the newly established Department of Public Safety. FSB went through several interim Commissioners in rapid succession due to political unrest and an extreme workload. Backlogs that already existed before the hurricane increased, and new operational issues emerged that prevented the lab and MEO from meeting the needs of the criminal justice system on the island. Cases were not being worked, reports were not available for court proceedings, and grieving families could not get access to their deceased loved ones for burial. Political officials from the Puerto Rico Department of Justice, Department of Public Safety, and Governor's Office were looking for solutions to the issues at FSB.

Assistance came initially from ASCLD and NAAG volunteers, and they were able to engage volunteers from several other large forensic science organizations. While initially the FSB staff were a bit skeptical of the staying power of these volunteers, they quickly learned of the determination and resolve they brought to help the situation. They were initially able to assess operational, instrumental, and staffing needs and begin to identify and bring resources to help. They were able to gain the confidence of government officials to help FSB make assurances to those entities, the media, and accrediting bodies that the situation would improve. Efforts were made to identify and train leaders at FSB, and a new permanent Commissioner was identified and confirmed by legislative leadership. While efforts are ongoing to address physical facility, information technology, security, technical, staffing, and other operational issues, the volunteer help of colleagues from all over the United States has been extremely valuable and provides hope to the people of Puerto Rico.

This presentation—which we propose will be accompanied by sister presentations by our partners at ASCLD, NAAG, the American Board of Forensic Anthropology, and the American Society for Clinical Pathology—will address, among other things: (1) forensic science challenges in Puerto Rico before and after Hurricane Maria; (2) leadership and operational challenges the laboratory had in recovering from a natural disaster, government bankruptcy, and government restructuring; (3) challenges and benefits in accepting help from and coordinating with a volunteer initiative; and (4) lessons learned by FSB through this project, including navigating cultural and language barriers, learning to trust entities offering help and setting effective boundaries, managing and coordinating multiple organizations offering various assistance, navigating federal and state government rules and restrictions in an emergency situation, managing political, stakeholder, and public expectations without the resources, working with disaster recovery experts and organizations, and developing a leadership team and management structure amid political and financial instability.

Puerto Rico, Recovery, Emergency Preparedness