

# At the Center of the Storm

*San Juan Mayor Carmen Yulín Cruz  
and the Response to Hurricane Maria*

## *Educator Guide*

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### Overview

This Educator Guide is designed to assist instructors in teaching this case to students and practitioners. It is based on [case pedagogy](#), which invites participants to put themselves in the shoes of the protagonist(s) of the case and imagine how they would respond to the circumstances. Participants should read the teaching case in advance and identify key issues as a preliminary step toward meeting the learning objectives. Instructors may then use the time in the classroom to guide participants in exploring the issues and examining the challenges in the case; to introduce key concepts, tools, and frameworks; and to assist participants in applying their learning to their own environments and challenges.

This guide includes learning objectives, a synopsis, key questions, and a roadmap for discussions. The roadmap is offered to initiate meaningful conversation but is by no means the only way to teach the case. Each educator or facilitator should feel free to design their own teaching plans; both the structure and the time allotted for each component are suggestions.

### Learning Objectives

This case asks students to think about the tasks and challenges associated with mayoral leadership during a major crisis and to consider how this type of leadership differs from overseeing city government during normal operations or a routine emergency. More specifically, it seeks to advance readers' understanding of several key roles a mayor may need to play during a crisis, including: (1) griever-in-chief (i.e., representing and consoling the community and keeping it together); (2) central manager and coordinator of city efforts (i.e., overseeing the emergency response and coordinating the efforts of city departments with agencies from other levels of government and NGOs); and (3) chief advocate and negotiator (i.e., advocating for and negotiating relief efforts and support with other levels of government, donors, and aid agencies).

In a broader sense, the case aims to help mayors and other senior public officials reflect on how well prepared they are for crises and how they can better position themselves to direct response efforts as threats emerge and materialize.

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## Case Synopsis

This case profiles how Carmen Yulín Cruz, Mayor of San Juan, Puerto Rico, led her city's response to Hurricane Maria, which devastated the island and neighboring parts of the Caribbean in the fall of 2017. By highlighting Cruz's decisions and actions prior to, during, and following the storm's landfall, the case provides readers with insight into the challenges of preparing for and responding to severe crises like Maria. The case illustrates how several key factors—including San Juan's pre-storm preparedness efforts, the city's relationships with other jurisdictions and entities, and the ability to adapt and improvise in the face of novel and extreme conditions—shaped the response to one of the worst natural disasters in American history.

To put the city's experience with Maria in perspective, the case begins by providing the reader with background information on both the Municipality of San Juan and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. It briefly discusses the territory's history and relationship with the rest of the United States, explores Cruz's political career, and overviews the severe economic and fiscal crises that San Juan, along with the rest of Puerto Rico, endured in the years leading up to Maria.

The case then details how in September 2017, Maria slammed into Puerto Rico where it caused unprecedented damage and took thousands of lives. At this point, the case takes the perspective of Mayor Cruz and senior city officials, recounting how they rode out the storm and then began processing and coming to terms with Maria's terrible toll. It stresses the difficulty Cruz and her team faced in getting a sense of the scale and nature of the destruction left in the storm's wake, given that it had brought down almost all communication systems as well as the island's electrical grid.

Facing so much uncertainty, San Juan officials had little choice but to improvise a response. Accordingly, the case illustrates how Cruz and municipal workers self-deployed throughout the city to assess conditions and provide what limited aid they could in the hours and days immediately following landfall. At the same time, it also depicts how they began to more formally organize the city's response, launching and then finetuning an array of activities that they managed from their command center at the Coliseum, a city-owned sports complex.

Despite the city's efforts, however, much-needed support from the territorial and federal governments was slow to materialize, and the limited amount of aid that did arrive proved woefully inadequate to meet the needs of San Juan residents and their fellow Puerto Ricans. The main part of the case concludes by depicting the tensions associated with this issue, which reached a boiling point when President Trump's Acting Secretary of Homeland Security, Elaine Duke, publicly characterized the response to Maria as a "good news story"—a striking disconnect from what Cruz and others were experiencing on the ground. Readers are placed in the mayor's shoes as she learns of Duke's comments and considers how best to respond. Ending at this decision point, the case prompts readers to evaluate Cruz's options as she seeks to accelerate the pace of relief efforts while accounting for the complicated political dynamics of intergovernmental relations and Puerto Rico's dependency on Washington for aid and support.

The epilogue may be assigned with the main case in advance or provided separately following classroom discussion. It describes how Cruz chose to proceed and then depicts the consequences of

her decision, focusing on how her actions affected relations between San Juan and the federal government as well as their implications for the overall response. The epilogue concludes with the mayor reflecting on her choices.

## Key Questions

1. What factors prior to Maria’s landfall helped Cruz and her administration prepare for the hurricane? What factors hindered their ability to do so?
2. What factors in the immediate aftermath of the storm made mounting an effective response so challenging? In what ways did Cruz and other San Juan officials attempt to overcome these challenges? How did their response reflect *true crisis leadership* as opposed to *routine emergency management*?
3. What were Cruz’s main tasks as mayor during the response to Maria? What were some specific examples of how she tackled these tasks?
4. How would you assess the effects of Cruz’s decision to publicly confront the White House and then engage with President Trump via Twitter and other media? Did she achieve her aims or did doing so prove counterproductive? Should she have pursued an alternative strategy, as Governor Rosselló and other Puerto Rican leaders chose to do?

## Roadmap for Discussion

**Introduction** (3-10 minutes): Briefly state the goal of the session in reference to the case, cite specific major conflicts facing the protagonist, and foreshadow broader learning objectives.

**Exploration** (45-60 minutes): Use class discussion, “buzz groups,” and board work to examine the issues and options confronting the protagonist.

**Diagnosis** (15-30 minutes): Introduce key concepts, frameworks, and tools to help participants pinpoint possible solutions to major conflicts in the case.

**Application** (15 minutes, optional): Ask participants to relate the concepts and frameworks to their own organizations’ challenges.

**Wrap-Up and Takeaways** (15 minutes): Review the learning objectives and discuss insights most relevant to your organizations’ challenges.

### Introduction

Briefly state the topic of the case along with the key learning objectives of the session (see preceding sections). Identify the primary conflicts experienced by the case’s protagonist. In the broadest sense, this can be defined as Cruz’s efforts to ensure the safety and security of her constituents in the face of an unprecedented natural disaster. But achieving this goal was an incredibly difficult undertaking, and the case illustrates how the mayor encountered and wrestled with several distinct challenges associated with it. For instance, in advance of landfall, she had to galvanize the city bureaucracy—already consumed by the response to Hurricane Irma—to swiftly prepare for Maria’s arrival. Then, in the storm’s immediate aftermath, she had to figure out how to overcome a host of new conflicts and challenges: obtaining situational awareness when all communication and power systems had collapsed; connecting with and supporting survivors in both a physical and emotional sense, despite

the many obstacles to navigating the city and reaching them; and mobilizing and motivating city employees—many of them personally affected by the one-two punch of Irma and Maria—to improvise and then more formally organize a city-directed response.

Eventually, her efforts came to center around an especially difficult challenge: trying to accelerate the delivery of federal aid. Roughly a week into the response, Cruz faced a crucial decision point when she learned that the Trump administration had begun characterizing its efforts in a positive light, despite the mayor (along with many others) seeing little evidence of any real progress on the ground. Cruz then had to decide how should she respond to the White House’s claims, which she viewed as dangerously misleading, as she sought to obtain the level of federal assistance necessary to address the rapidly worsening conditions in San Juan and elsewhere on the island.

Remind students to consider how these various challenges and conflicts relate to the core learning objectives of the case, i.e., understanding the key roles of a mayor during a crisis, including:

- (1) griever-in-chief (i.e., representing and consoling the community and keeping it together);
- (2) central manager and coordinator of city efforts (i.e., overseeing the emergency response and coordinating the efforts of city departments with agencies from other levels of government and NGOs);
- (3) chief advocate and negotiator (i.e., advocating for and negotiating relief efforts and support with other levels of government, donors, and aid agencies).

### Exploration

Next, facilitate full class or breakout group discussions to more fully explore the core challenges Cruz and her advisors confronted as Maria bore down on the island and as conditions then worsened in the aftermath of the storm. Consider the options they had for addressing them.

#### Background Information (optional, if time allows and if necessitated by specific teaching objectives)

You may wish to place the case in context by first asking students to identify some of the preexisting conditions and factors that affected how Cruz, as well as San Juan and Puerto Rico at large, experienced Maria. Important considerations include:

- *Puerto Rico’s political status*  
A territory of the US since the late 1800s, the island (as of 2020) lacked full representation in Congress, did not vote for the President of the US, and—despite having had some autonomy over internal affairs—ultimately fell under the control of the federal government. This meant that the territory had far less political influence in Washington than the fifty states, making it more difficult to obtain resources, both in “normal” times and in the face of severe crises such as Maria, when federal aid was particularly critical.
- *The economy*  
In the years preceding Maria, Puerto Rico had endured an economic recession alongside a severe fiscal crisis. During that time, several governors had implemented a series of austerity measures to try and bring spending under control and improve the territory’s finances. But

along with cuts to many other public services, these measures led to decreased investment in the territory's response capacity, thus weakening disaster preparedness across the island.

Meanwhile, in 2016 Congress passed and President Obama signed into law legislation that created the Financial Oversight and Management Board (FOMB) to oversee the territory's budgets and fiscal policies. Dominated by federal appointees, FOMB was—in the eyes of many Puerto Ricans—yet another example of colonial domination by Washington. Regardless of whether the board proved capable of fulfilling its mission, FOMB's establishment represented a significant expansion of Washington's influence over the Commonwealth in the lead-up to Maria.

- *Cruz's background*  
Although a member of Puerto Rico's Legislative Assembly since 2009, Cruz was in many ways a political outsider when she was elected mayor of San Juan in 2012. Surprising many, she ousted an entrenched incumbent by putting together a broad coalition of voters, including many who were often marginalized or under-represented politically. Her community-centric policies proved popular, and she was in her second term as mayor when Maria struck. (For more on Mayor Cruz, see: <https://www.ozy.com/true-and-stories/how-the-mayor-of-san-juan-is-fighting-for-her-people/89332/>.)
- *Natural Disasters in 2017*  
The US experienced an unusually large number of major disasters in the months prior to Maria. Among them: severe wildfires in California, as well as Hurricanes Harvey and Irma—historically devastating events for the Houston metropolitan area and the eastern Caribbean and Florida, respectively. Thus, federal resources were stretched thin by the time Maria struck Puerto Rico in late September 2017. (For more on this topic, see: <https://www.fema.gov/media-library-data/1531743865541-d16794d43d3082544435e1471da07880/2017FEMAHurricaneAAR.pdf>.)

### Hurricane Irma: Precursor to Maria

Whether or not you choose to explore any of the above issues, make a point to address Hurricane Irma, which of the many major disasters occurring in 2017 is most directly connected to San Juan's experience with Maria.

Affecting much of the same area that Maria would just two weeks later, Irma had an impact on the availability of resources in Puerto Rico and on neighboring islands. For instance, in the immediate aftermath of the storm, National Guard troops and supplies staged in Puerto Rico were sent to aid the response in the US Virgin Islands, which were especially hard-hit by Irma. Moreover, when coupled with Maria, Irma put enormous strain on public employees in San Juan and elsewhere in Puerto Rico, who were deeply involved in response efforts for weeks on end—even as they, as survivors themselves, struggled to recover from the two storms. At the same time, Irma served as a sort of dress rehearsal for Maria. Causing some (but not catastrophic) damage in San Juan and other parts of the island, Irma prompted Cruz and her administration to implement a series of response measures that they would replicate in the lead-up to Maria.

### Hurricane Maria and the Key Issues Confronting Mayor Cruz

Having established this context, instruct the class to focus on the core issues Cruz and her staff faced leading up to, during, and following Maria. They include:

- *Preparing for Maria*  
Prior to making landfall on Puerto Rico, Maria developed and then moved across the Caribbean at an unusually high speed. The forecasts made clear that Puerto Rico lay directly in the storm's path and was set to experience considerable damage. Coupled with the demands already associated with recovering from Irma, this made for an especially challenging set of circumstances as Cruz and her aides considered how best to prepare. One option was to admit that they were already over-extended and as such would need to rely in large part on external support from other levels of government, namely territorial and federal resources. Alternatively, they could scramble to mobilize as robust a response as possible, including drawing from and building on what they had previously done for Irma.
- *Difficulty knowing extent and nature of damage and connecting with the outside world*  
By taking down Puerto Rico's electrical grid and most of the communication infrastructure on the island, as well as damaging a considerable amount of other critical infrastructure, Maria made it extremely difficult to mount an effective response. For instance, in the immediate aftermath of the storm, Cruz and the municipal employees with her at the Coliseum were largely unable to reach the outside world. This had numerous implications, perhaps most significantly minimizing their situational awareness of conditions on the ground in other parts of the city. San Juan officials were thus confronted with the challenge of having to set a course of action, allocate supplies, and establish priorities while operating in an information vacuum, unsure of the extent and nature of the damage or the needs of their constituents. The collapse of the power and communication systems also made it virtually impossible to connect with key partners who the city would otherwise turn to in the aftermath of a major disaster (i.e., representatives of neighboring municipalities, the territorial government, community groups and other NGOs, and federal authorities). To overcome these challenges, the mayor and the team of municipal workers at the city's command center could remain there, hoping that assistance might soon come from neighboring communities, the territorial government, federal authorities, and the private sector. Or they could begin improvising their own response, expanding and adjusting it as circumstances changed.
- *Consoling survivors, supporting city employees*  
In addition to taking down power and telephone lines, Maria's winds and rain inflicted an enormous amount of physical damage in San Juan. Rain and storm surge clogged city streets with floodwaters and debris, and—along with the storm's heavy winds—caused significant structural damage to homes, businesses, hospitals, and key municipal buildings such as City Hall in Old San Juan, which had been designated a shelter prior to landfall. There, municipal workers had to shepherd people from one room to another as the storm's winds caused windows to shatter and other damage to the building. Maria also caused injuries and took the lives of city residents. (A highly controversial and politicized issue, the official death toll in Puerto Rico from Maria stands at 2,975, making the storm one of the deadliest natural disasters in American history.)

In the days and weeks following landfall, Cruz had to gauge how to console her constituents suffering from Maria’s disastrous toll, as well as the many municipal employees who worked tirelessly to provide residents with aid. How could she best demonstrate that she recognized and understood their pain? Was this an essential role for her to play when she also needed to spend a significant amount of time figuring out how to obtain and deliver resources and address the severe physical consequences of the storm? Could and should she delegate this work to others?

- *Negotiating with other levels of government*

As the days passed, it became clear to Cruz and others that the territorial government was unable to provide the level of assistance San Juan and other municipalities on the island required. In some ways, this did not come as a surprise, as officials from the Puerto Rico Emergency Management Agency (PREMA) had warned Cruz and her advisors in advance of Maria that San Juan should expect to be on its own for the first several days following landfall. Moreover, previous experience had taught the mayor that she could not rely on the territorial government to provide some of the critical services for which it technically had responsibility, such as managing a system of emergency shelters. But in the end, Maria also overwhelmed the territorial government in ways that were entirely unanticipated. For instance, PREMA’s leadership effectively collapsed in the face of Maria, which led the governor to task the Puerto Rico National Guard with carrying out some of the agency’s key activities, while also asking for the eventual resignation of its director.

All of this meant that the federal government would need to step in and play a major role in the response effort. But federal aid was painfully slow to arrive, and roughly a week after landfall—despite initially having several constructive conversations with representatives of the Trump administration—Cruz was shocked to learn that senior federal officials were casting Washington’s role in the response in a positive light, with the Acting Secretary of Homeland Security even calling the effort a “good news” story. Cruz then had to decide if she wanted to continue “playing nice,” as the Governor of Puerto Rico and some other officials were doing, or if she needed to take a more aggressive, perhaps even antagonistic approach to force the White House’s hand and expedite the delivery of aid. This ultimately represents the key conflict at the conclusion of the case. An epilogue then presents Cruz’s decision and its consequences.

## **Diagnosis**

Having identified the core conflicts and challenges of the case, lead the class in discussing how Cruz, as the chief protagonist, chose to resolve them. Incorporate relevant theoretical concepts and frameworks, such as the following, to help participants analyze and understand her actions.

### Routine Emergencies vs. True Crises

Many of the issues and dilemmas central to this case, as outlined in the above “Exploration” section, can be best understood by differentiating between routine emergencies and true crises—and by identifying the unique set of leadership skills required for managing crisis events.

As Professors Arnold Howitt and Dutch Leonard of Harvard Kennedy School argue, routine emergencies—while potentially very dangerous and unsettling—occur with relative frequency. As

such, they can be anticipated, prepared for, and managed through generally standardized and well-practiced processes. Over time and through repeated experience, organizations have thus developed and invested in personnel, resources, and protocols to resolve these events with a limited amount of disruption to society at large.<sup>i</sup>

A classic example of a routine emergency is a residential fire. The fire could very well cause significant property damage and endanger or even tragically take the lives of some residents and first responders, but fire departments and their partner agencies are well practiced in responding to such an event. They have trained their personnel and acquired the resources necessary for containing and eventually putting out the flames (albeit, at times, with the help of external assistance) before the fire becomes a massive conflagration with far more devastating consequences.

A crisis, on the other hand, features a substantial amount of novelty, whether due to the extreme scale of the event, the fact that nothing like it has ever been experienced, or that it contains an unusual or unprecedented combination of circumstances and challenges.<sup>ii</sup> In contrast to a routine emergency, significant elements of the event are unknown—even unimaginable—and thus cannot be fully anticipated. Gaining an understanding of what is happening and then determining the appropriate steps to take (i.e., obtaining and acting on situational awareness) is a critical first step for any type of emergency response. (It is important to note that novelty can be highly subjective; what might be new or highly unusual for one organization or jurisdiction may in fact be familiar and thus more routine for another.) Prominent examples of crises in recent history include the COVID-19 pandemic, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and the 2011 earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear accident in Tohoku, Japan.

Featuring a considerable amount of novelty, Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico clearly qualified as a crisis. To start with, the scale of the event and the destruction it caused were extreme. Not only was Maria a powerful category four hurricane at landfall, but the storm also traveled across the entirety of the island, leading to the unprecedented collapse of its electrical grid and communication systems as well as other significant property damage. Moreover, despite its location in the warm waters of the Caribbean where hurricanes are relatively common, Maria was the first major storm to strike Puerto Rico since Georges in 1998, a span of almost twenty years. This meant that elected leaders in office at the time of Maria, as well as first responders and the population at large, had little experience dealing with a hurricane of any real significance.

Finally, mention that approaches to responding to emergencies and crises differ in several important ways. For instance, emergency response typically benefits from a more centralized, hierarchical system

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<sup>i</sup> See, for example: Arnold M. Howitt and Herman B. Leonard, with David W. Giles, *Managing Crises: Responses to Large-Scale Emergencies* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2009); Arnold M. Howitt, Herman B. "Dutch" Leonard, and David W. Giles, "Leadership in Routine Emergencies and Crises: The Deepwater Horizon Incident," *The Coast Guard Journal of Safety and Security at Sea: Proceedings of the Marine Safety and Security Council* (May-December 2017), available at [https://www.hks.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/centers/research-initiatives/crisisleadership/files/Howitt\\_Leonard\\_Giles\\_LEADERSHIP\\_ROUTINE\\_EMERGENCIES\\_AND\\_CRISES.pdf](https://www.hks.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/centers/research-initiatives/crisisleadership/files/Howitt_Leonard_Giles_LEADERSHIP_ROUTINE_EMERGENCIES_AND_CRISES.pdf); and Herman B. "Dutch" Leonard and Arnold M. Howitt, "Against Desperate Peril: High Performance in Emergency Preparation and Response," in Deborah E. Gibbons (Ed.), *Communicable Crises: Prevention, Response, and Recovery in the Global Arena* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2007), available at [https://www.hks.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/centers/research-initiatives/crisisleadership/files/desperate\\_peril.pdf](https://www.hks.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/centers/research-initiatives/crisisleadership/files/desperate_peril.pdf).

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

of command and control, while crisis response often requires elements of decentralization and a flatter, more collaborative organizational design in order to brainstorm and develop potential courses of action (although a centralized structure may be appropriate for the execution phase).

Adherence to standard operating procedures are typical in emergency response, while crisis response features an extensive amount of adaptation and improvisation. Importantly, due to their political, economic, and social significance, crises also usually involve the participation of high-profile stakeholders, including elected officials from affected jurisdictions: mayors, city councilors, legislative representatives, governors, etc. Thus, operational commanders and technical experts who may be used to operating with relative autonomy during routine emergencies often find themselves working closely with political leaders, who typically assume a much more direct role in leading the response. Moreover, given that crises are multi-agency, multi-jurisdictional, and multi-sectoral events in which no one entity is likely to have total authority over the others, the many different stakeholders involved need to find ways to collaborate and coordinate with each other in order to implement a cohesive and effective response strategy.<sup>iii</sup>

An understanding of these theoretical concepts should be useful as participants then discuss how Cruz and her team chose to address the various conflicts highlighted in the case. Stress those concepts as you guide the participants' reexamination of the case's core conflicts.

- *Preparing for Maria: A scramble to mobilize, informed by prior experience*  
As previously noted, Cruz quickly determined in the lead-up to Maria's arrival that she could not plan on the territorial government or others to come to San Juan's aid in the immediate aftermath of the storm. This was due to what Puerto Rican emergency management officials had explicitly told her and the city's previous experience with the territorial government. Thus, she realized the city had to do what it could to prepare despite already being strained by its experience with Hurricane Irma. This required a certain amount of improvisation and adaptation, given the grave danger Maria posed and the short timeframe they had to prepare for it. Thanks to its experience with Irma, however, the city was, in fact, well positioned to begin preparing for Maria. And despite the extreme novelty the storm would ultimately present, Cruz and her team's actions prior to landfall represented, in some ways, a routinization of response, as they drew on their most recent experience with Irma.

One of Cruz's major decisions was to remain at the city-owned Coliseum sports complex, where she had been since Irma and where she had established a command center to oversee the city's response to the hurricanes. She also tasked city employees (as she had done in advance of Irma) with buying and stockpiling a range of critical supplies including medical equipment, fuel, water, generators, and ice. She relayed these and other orders with a sense of urgency, holding a planning meeting with senior staff in the middle of the night and repeating her orders clearly and emphatically in the days and hours leading up to landfall.

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<sup>iii</sup> Ibid; Also: Herman B. "Dutch" Leonard and Arnold M. Howitt, "The Heat of the Moment," *Compass* (Fall 2004), 2 (1), 19-23, 2004, available at [https://www.hks.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/centers/research-initiatives/crisisleadership/files/heat\\_moment.pdf](https://www.hks.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/centers/research-initiatives/crisisleadership/files/heat_moment.pdf).

Meanwhile, at Cruz's direction, the city also opened several shelters for San Juan residents who lived in flood-vulnerable neighborhoods or who lacked secure housing. In addition to serving as Cruz's command center, the Coliseum functioned as the largest of these shelters. In an unusual move, Cruz designated City Hall, located in historic Old San Juan, as a shelter as well. The city spread word of these and the other shelter openings by deploying sound trucks to targeted neighborhoods and by leveraging an informal network of key community contacts, who then relayed the news to their neighbors. Notably, Cruz decided not to rely on the emergency shelter system run by the territorial government, having determined, based on previous experience, that it would be best for the city to run its own facilities.

- *Difficulty knowing extent and nature of damage: Building situational awareness through improvisation and adaptation*

Although they had survived Maria within the relative safety of the Coliseum's walls, Cruz and the municipal workers who had sheltered there at first had no idea how the rest of the city had fared. If Maria had been a routine emergency, they would have immediately received reports and started connecting with key partners by phone and email. But they now faced a highly unusual challenge: The storm had knocked out almost all means of communication, not only in San Juan but across the entire island. Given this—and with the understanding that external assistance would not be immediately available—they improvised their next steps, deciding to leave the safety of the Coliseum and venture out into the streets of the city, even as tropical-storm-strength winds continued. They observed firsthand the damage caused by Maria and engaged with survivors, who in turn directly informed them of their ordeals and needs. Cruz and her team then had the information they needed to begin providing aid and organizing the city's relief efforts.

Meanwhile, city officials began connecting with representatives of external partners, but again in a largely spontaneous, ad hoc manner, such as when Cruz encountered a team of New York City (NYC) emergency management professionals while out in the field. Unbeknownst to Cruz, NYC Mayor Bill de Blasio had taken the initiative to deploy the team, which would provide San Juan with vital support in the days and weeks ahead. This delegation, along with other groups that would make their way to San Juan (such as the AFL-CIO), illustrated the importance of preexisting alliances and relationships paying off. (Cruz had strong ties to New York politicians, as well as to major unions.)

- *Consoling survivors, supporting city employees: Prioritizing empathy*

In addition to providing much-needed situational awareness, directly engaging with survivors allowed Cruz to connect in a personal and empathetic way with her constituents, and she frequently found herself consoling them as she traveled through San Juan's flooded streets. The mayor understood the value of these exchanges for the survivors who had lost so much and were in search of any sign of help from public officials like herself; they had a significant impact on her as well, heavily influencing her actions and decisions regarding the overall response. As Cruz would later explain, "There is no substitute for seeing the eyes of the people when they are in pain. . . . You can't do that from a bunker with air conditioning."<sup>1</sup> Although she had to grapple with a host of other responsibilities, the mayor

prioritized these exchanges, recognizing how fundamental they were to every other aspect of the response and her role in it.

Meanwhile, as the days wore on, the mayor also realized the importance of looking out for and supporting her staff, many of whom had been working around the clock since Irma had struck Puerto Rico in early September. This meant watching for signs of exhaustion and despair, talking to those who seemed to be struggling, and granting them leave so that they could care for themselves and their loved ones and recharge before returning to work. Although the mayor made a point to connect on an emotional level with both her constituents and staff, she also believed it was important that they see her as a pillar of strength during such a trying time. She thus avoided breaking down in front of them, despite her own exhaustion and pain.

- *Improvising a decentralized response*

The high degree of novelty associated with Maria meant that standard modes of operating were not suited to the task at hand. This led to Cruz devising and implementing a response strategy that featured a considerable amount of improvisation and adaptation. As discussed, she and other city employees quickly took to the streets of San Juan as opposed to trying to direct operations in a centralized manner from the Coliseum. This also meant that as city workers converged on the Coliseum in the immediate aftermath of the storm, they took on whatever task seemed the most urgent at the time, no matter their background or expertise. Communications staff, for instance, began preparing meals, while parks department employees helped to set up a supply distribution system. During the next several days and weeks, Cruz delegated a significant amount of decision-making authority to the municipal workers who spent most of their days out in the field.

Over time, however, the city was able to formalize and routinize many aspects of its response effort, establishing morning and evening check-in and debrief sessions for senior leadership, matching staff to assignments that they were best-suited for, and—with the help of the NYC emergency management team—professionalizing the supply-distribution system. (The NYC team also helped connect San Juan with the territorial and federal governments, which had established a separate command post at the San Juan Convention Center.)

- *Negotiating with other levels of government: Going public*

Responses to crises frequently involve many agencies and actors representing multiple levels of government, NGOs, and the private sector. Because no one entity will likely control the others in a formal sense, an effective response requires that these organizations closely coordinate and collaborate with each other.

During the response to Maria, the territorial and federal governments tried to channel much of that coordination through a Joint Field Office (JFO) located at the San Juan Convention Center. And although they continued to direct their own operations from their command center at the Coliseum, San Juan officials also relied on the NYC Emergency

Management team to help bridge their efforts with those being coordinated through the JFO. For her part, Cruz also noted that she initially had several constructive conversations with Trump administration officials as she sought to expedite the delivery of federal aid to the island.

But roughly a week following landfall, tensions between the City of San Juan and the White House threatened to derail any coordination that was taking place. The mayor had become increasingly frustrated with the level of support provided by federal authorities, and she was pushed to the breaking point when the Trump administration began casting its efforts in a positive light, especially after the Acting Secretary of Homeland Security characterized the response to Maria as a “good news story.” Instead of continuing to work behind the scenes and trying to patiently collaborate with federal partners, Cruz decided it was time to go public with her frustrations by organizing a press conference. Although several of her key advisors cautioned that doing so could be politically devastating, Cruz firmly believed that she had no other choice. Her efforts—as well as those of other Puerto Rican officials, including the governor—to “play nice” with the White House did not appear to have helped them gain necessary support.

Cruz’s press conference attracted global attention. Despite triggering the president to attack her directly on Twitter (and other public confrontations with his administration notwithstanding), she was convinced she had made the right decision. Not only did the federal government significantly expand its involvement in the relief (although it should be noted that it had begun to by the time of the press conference), other cities and states in the US—as well as many more NGOs, businesses, and private citizens—began paying much more attention to the situation in Puerto Rico and donating badly needed aid.

### **Application** (optional)

In conveying the specifics of Cruz’s experience with Hurricane Maria, this case study is intended to prompt mayors and their senior advisors to think about how well prepared they are for a crisis of similar scale and severity and how they would want to act when confronted by such an event.

You may ask participants to relate some of the concepts and frameworks discussed above to their own organizations’ challenges. Specifically, you may ask them to reflect on the following questions:

- *How familiar are you with your own emergency management departments and their capabilities, as well as the relevant capabilities of other city agencies?*
- *How strong are your relationships with leaders of neighboring municipalities and of state, territorial, or provincial government?*
- *Have you had practice responding in tandem with these other stakeholders, whether through exercises and drills or through smaller-scale emergencies?*
- *While it is impossible to plan for the specifics of a novel event, have you spent time identifying resources and personnel and developing plans that you can draw on for the response?*
- *Have you thought through and practiced crisis communication strategies both for the general public outside the disaster zone and for your constituents, who—as survivors of the*

*disaster—are looking for comfort, support, and guidance on what to do and how to move forward?*

### Wrap-up and Takeaways

At the conclusion of the class sessions, prompt the participants to review the key learning objectives of the case study and then encourage them to reflect on and share what issues raised in the case are most relevant to their own organizations.

### Additional Frameworks

In teaching this case study, you may wish to pair it with one or two other Kennedy School cases that address the themes of crisis leadership and the politics of crisis response. Suggested cases include:

David Giles. 2018. *A Cascade of Emergencies: Responding to Superstorm Sandy in New York City (A and B)*. Harvard Kennedy School of Government Case Program, case numbers 2124.0 and 2125.0.

David Giles. 2013. *The Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill: The Politics of Crisis Response (A and B)*. Harvard Kennedy School of Government Case Program, case numbers 1981.0 and 1982.0.

Esther Scott. 2006. *Hurricane Katrina: (A) Preparing for the Big One and Hurricane Katrina: (B) Responding to an "Ultra-Catastrophe" in New Orleans*. Harvard Kennedy School of Government Case Program, case numbers 1843.0 and 1844.0.

Esther Scott. 2004. *"Almost a Worst-Case Scenario:" The Baltimore Tunnel Fires of 2001 (A, B, and C)*. Harvard Kennedy School of Government Case Program, case numbers 1767.0, 1768.0, and 1769.0.

Taiya Smith. 2003. *Rudy Giuliani: The Man and His Moment*. Harvard Kennedy School of Government Case Program, case number 1681.0.

David Tannenwald. 2016. *Ready in Advance: The City of Tuscaloosa's Response to the 4/27/11 Tornado*. Harvard Kennedy School of Government Case Program, case number 2053.0.

In addition, you may wish to assign some analytical material to help explain the key theoretical concepts associated with this case study. Suggested readings include:

Arjen Boin, Allan McConnell, Eric Stern, and Paul 't Hart, "Leading in a Crisis: Committing to Clear Crisis Communications," Australia and New Zealand School of Government, April 9, 2020, available at <https://www.anzsog.edu.au/resource-library/research/committing-to-clear-crisis-communications>.

Arjen Boin, Paul 't Hart, Eric Stern, and Bengt Sundelius. *The Politics of Crisis Management: Public Leadership Under Pressure* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

Arnold M. Howitt, Herman B. "Dutch" Leonard, and David W. Giles, "Leadership in Routine Emergencies and Crises: The Deepwater Horizon Incident," *The Coast Guard Journal of Safety and Security at Sea: Proceedings of the Marine Safety and Security Council* (May-December

2017), available at [https://www.hks.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/centers/research-initiatives/crisisleadership/files/Howitt Leonard Giles LEADERSHIP ROUTINE EMERGENCIES AND CRISES.pdf](https://www.hks.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/centers/research-initiatives/crisisleadership/files/Howitt%20Leonard%20Giles%20LEADERSHIP%20ROUTINE%20EMERGENCIES%20AND%20CRISES.pdf).

Arnold M. Howitt and Herman B. Leonard, with David W. Giles. *Managing Crises: Responses to Large-Scale Emergencies* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2009).

Herman B. “Dutch” Leonard and Arnold M. Howitt, “Leading in Crises: Observations on the Political and Decision-Making Dimensions of Response,” in Ira Helsloot, et al., eds., *Mega-Crises: Understanding the Prospects, Nature, Characteristics and Effects of Cataclysmic Events* (Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas, 2012).

Herman B. “Dutch” Leonard and Arnold M. Howitt, “The Heat of the Moment,” *Compass* (Fall 2004), pp. 18-23, available at [https://www.hks.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/centers/research-initiatives/crisisleadership/files/heat\\_moment.pdf](https://www.hks.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/centers/research-initiatives/crisisleadership/files/heat_moment.pdf).

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Carmen Yulín Cruz, Mayor of San Juan, Puerto Rico, February 1, 2019.