

## Mission Trip to Puerto Rico

Witnessing resiliency and empowering mental health

[Campus News](#) | Posted on May 3, 2018



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Trip participants: Hulrick Baptist, Harvey Burnett, Philadelphia-Ruth Cadette, Krista Cooper, Halaila Correa-Acevedo, Kimberly Cruz, Ruby Huerta, Mary Insalaco, Ye Lim Kim, Amy Manjarres, Alina McBride Baltazar, Diana Mitchell, Linda Onneetse, Melissa Ponce-Rodas, Neal Ramroop, Acquisha Sampson, Alisha Schneider, Robert Thompson, Jasmin Wilson, Lianne Wynne. (Photo by Puerto Rico Mental Health Mission Trip)

By: Hannah Gallant, IMC student writer

Over 1,000 people in Puerto Rico learned more about mental health and how to cope after the disasters of Hurricanes Irma and Maria from the work of 20 Andrews University faculty, staff, students and an alumna. In the hurricane aftermath, the suicide rate on the island has increased by more than 400 percent.

The March 15–25, 2018, trip became a reality thanks to God’s help, eager volunteers and the financial support of the Lake Union, Something in Common Sabbath School class, and Institute for Prevention of Addictions (IPA). After many last-minute changes, the resulting team was an interdisciplinary group of students and staff from the Departments of Behavioral Sciences and Social Work, the Community & International Development (CIDP) program, the PhD program in counseling psychology, the MA program in clinical and mental health, and the Counseling & Testing Center.

Melissa Ponce-Rodas, assistant professor of psychology, says “it was a God-thing” that this trip was able to happen.

After arriving in Puerto Rico, the team could still see areas of devastation where fences were missing, roads were detoured and streetlights were out. In fact, there were almost no working stoplights while they were there. However, those living on the island reported that the situation was improving.

Diana Mitchell, staff counselor at the Counseling & Testing Center, said, “I expected more destruction, according to the pictures and what we had been told. I was surprised and shocked by how well they have been recovering. You can see the spirit. It was wonderful to witness that.”

As they were serving, the team heard many stories of individuals and communities who had been trapped, isolated or experienced great loss of materials and shelter. Despite what had happened, these individuals were thankful for how the disaster had unified their families and communities.

These positive reactions to the hurricane did not overshadow the need for mental health education and assistance. This is particularly true because of how mental health is viewed as a taboo topic.

Harvey Burnett, chair of the Department of Behavioral Sciences and assistant professor of psychology, summarizes the need and how the Andrews team responded to it. “Everyone was impacted, it just depends on proximity and where you’re at. Our job was more about education and normalizing their reactions, empowering them and their resilience.”

Educating victims about mental health provided an opportunity for individuals and communities to address their traumatic experiences—whether that be the loss of family or friends, the loss of property, or fear of future hurricanes.

Alina Baltazar, assistant professor of social work, explains how this help was received. “They were like a dry sponge ready to soak up all this mental health help. People were willing to admit the problems they were having since Maria. They weren’t all conscious of it until we brought it up, but to realize that they had it and were not alone, and that a lot of other people had it too, helped them.”

In the end, the Andrews team was able to meet with over 1,000 people face-to-face, including government officials, social workers, nursing assistants, community members, police, first responders and emergency management. They also televised two sermons and aired on the radio twice. “It was a very busy trip,” said Ye Lim Kim, junior psychology major. “I didn’t know that I was capable of doing that schedule for ten consecutive days...I now know that I am resilient and a good public speaker.”

Many of the people reached expressed gratitude and wondered when the team would return. “Someone would stand up and say thank you for being here. Your mere presence reminds us we are not alone. Thank you for not forgetting us,” said Ponce-Rodas.

The entire Andrews team expressed their willingness to go back and serve if the opportunity arose, and they are currently trying to find financial support to return.

For more information from the trip, visit the mission team's Facebook at [facebook.com/Puerto-Rico-Mental-Health-Mission-Trip-425002771274330/](https://www.facebook.com/Puerto-Rico-Mental-Health-Mission-Trip-425002771274330/). To contribute financially, visit [gofundme.com/puerto-rico-mental-health-mission](https://www.gofundme.com/puerto-rico-mental-health-mission).