



Central Florida lawmakers are frustrated over the lack of housing as Puerto Rican evacuees arrive in Orlando daily

No room for your kin

By [Monivette Cordeiro](#)



January 03, 2018

More than 100 days after Hurricane Maria's apocalyptic winds tore through Puerto Rico leaving floods, collapsed houses and bodies in its wake, the island remains shrouded in darkness.

Half of the 3.4 million U.S. citizens in the American territory are living without power, three months after Maria made landfall on Sept. 20 and destroyed the island's electrical grid – and many will likely remain that way until May, according to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. In the most dire cases, no electricity means no access to clean drinking water, no schools, no jobs, no medicine – no hope that things will return to normal anytime soon. As Puerto Rico's situation continues to deteriorate, hundreds of thousands of people have escaped to Florida for a respite from the despair.

Instead, they've fled headfirst into our state's dreadful affordable housing crisis.

The Orlando metro area ranks third in the nation for its lack of affordable rentals, with 18 affordable units available for every 100 extremely low-income families, according to a National Low Income Housing Coalition study. Local officials and nonprofits have been scrambling to accommodate evacuees who haven't been able

to stay with family members, getting them into hotels and temporary lodgings as they wait for relief. As of last Thursday, 283,000 people had arrived in Florida from Puerto Rico through airports in Orlando, Tampa and Miami, according to the state division of emergency management.

Now dealing with the third month of Maria migration, Central Florida lawmakers remain frustrated over housing options for evacuees. The situation came to a head last month after exasperated legislators sent letters to FEMA and the Puerto Rican government urging them to expand housing aid for evacuees or risk them becoming homeless.

"If just one family becomes homeless due to lack of action by the federal government or those officials making decisions in Puerto Rico, it is one family too many," said state Sen. Victor Torres, D-Orlando, in a statement.

In a Dec. 18 letter, Torres and other Democratic lawmakers pushed for Puerto Rico Gov. Ricardo Rosselló to formally request an extension of FEMA's hotel voucher program so hurricane victims could continue receiving help.

The Transitional Shelter Assistance (TSA) program pays for a short-term stay at participating motels and hotels while evacuees look for permanent housing.

"We know you are diligently working on recovery efforts in Puerto Rico, but we must also coordinate with your government for relief services needed in Florida," the letter said. "It has become apparent that in order for us to get financial assistance from the federal government, specific requests for that assistance must be made by your government on behalf of those residents of Puerto Rico now residing in Florida."

The program is set to expire for Puerto Rican evacuees on Jan. 13. State lawmakers asked Rosselló to request six more months from FEMA. Instead, he only asked for 60 days.

"The government of Puerto Rico, while enduring a lengthy and arduous recovery effort at home, is committed to providing and facilitating federal assistance to its temporarily displaced residents," said José Marrero, the governor's representative to FEMA.

FEMA spokesperson Daniel Llangués said last week the governor's request for a TSA extension was "still under review" by the federal agency.

State legislators also wanted Rosselló to ask FEMA to expand the use of the Direct Lease program to Florida. The move would allow Puerto Rican evacuees to receive federal financial aid for short-term vacant rentals for at least 18 months until they return to the island or find permanent housing here. The program has been active in the commonwealth since October. That request was apparently ignored because two days later, on Dec. 20, a bipartisan group of Congress members from Florida

sent a letter to FEMA administrator William Long asking for the agency to directly authorize the program for the host state instead of waiting for Puerto Rico.

"Florida's local and state governments lack a sufficient supply of housing to accommodate the recent, and anticipated, arrival of evacuees," the letter said. "Puerto Rican evacuees in Florida need housing. Florida needs assistance to support the housing needs of the Puerto Rican evacuees."

Llargués says Florida officials don't have the power to request the Direct Lease program for evacuees in their state – the Puerto Rican governor must choose to expand it. *Orlando Weekly* reached out to the Puerto Rican government to ask why it wouldn't expand the Direct Lease program for evacuees in Florida but did not receive a response by press time.

Unlike Democratic lawmakers, Gov. Rick Scott and other top state leaders have not publicly pressured Rosselló for his help on housing evacuees in the Sunshine State. Scott's office says the governor is focused on helping the island and Puerto Rican evacuees.

"Since Oct. 3, more than 34,000 individuals have visited airport multi-agency resource centers, which were opened at the direction of Gov. Scott," said spokesperson Kerri Wyland in a statement. "We are hopeful FEMA and Governor Rosselló will find a solution to help all those displaced by Hurricane Maria."

At a task force meeting on the issue last week, U.S. Rep. Darren Soto, D-Orlando, said Congress members were requesting a waiver from FEMA so funding would come directly to the state.

"Truth be told, there's a little tension with Puerto Rico because they don't want to encourage people to leave, but they know that we need it," Soto said.

That tension has even extended past housing toward the education system. In the three months after Maria, 10,324 Puerto Rican students enrolled in Florida public school districts, according to a December survey from the Center for Puerto Rican Studies at Hunter College. Almost half of those students ended up in two school districts – Orange County (2,590) and Osceola County (1,960).

Florida Education Commissioner Pam Stewart announced in November that she was working with her counterpart on the island on a plan that would allow high-school students who evacuated to graduate on time with Puerto Rican diplomas instead of trying to meet state graduation requirements for a Florida diploma.

But in a Dec. 22 letter from the Orange and Osceola school superintendents, the two districts said they hadn't seen a response from the Puerto Rican education department regarding diplomas.

"Time is running out to find a solution for these students," the letter says.

State Rep. Amy Mercado, who signed onto the Dec. 18 letter, says federal and state officials are "dragging their feet" in addressing the pending housing crisis that evacuees will face.

"It's incredibly frustrating," the Orlando Democrat says. "What's going to happen is when all of these things expire, it becomes Orange County's problem, Osceola County's problem – period. And the locals don't have the capacity to handle it."

Mercado says part of the problem is the perception of how long Puerto Rican evacuees will stay. Some state leaders believe the situation is temporary and that evacuees will return to the island once conditions improve.

"If I'm going to uproot my life, my kids from an area in Puerto Rico that still doesn't have power to come here and find a place to live, get jobs for myself and my husband, place my kids in school – what part of that sounds temporary?" Mercado asks. "This problem doesn't have a 60-day window or 180-day window. [The evacuees] might be here maybe two years, five years or permanently. It's not going to be temporary."

On the other side of the aisle, state Rep. Rene Plasencia, R-Orlando, also thinks most evacuees will end up calling Florida home.

"I, too, believe that the vast majority of people who have come here don't want to go back to Puerto Rico," Plasencia said at a task force meeting last week. "I think the majority will stay here and find a way to get to a certain area probably within close proximity to Central Florida where they can have jobs, where they can get affordable housing."

Central Florida lawmakers from both parties have proposed a number of solutions to fix the area's affordable housing shortage.

State Rep. Bob Cortes, R-Altamonte Springs, has sponsored a bill to streamline the permitting process for affordable housing developers by banning municipal impact fees. Mercado, Torres and other Democratic lawmakers have rallied against stopping the Florida Legislature from raiding millions every year from the Sadowski Affordable Housing Trust Funds collected from real estate transactions for other projects. Already Gov. Scott has suggested diverting \$92 million in his proposed 2018-2019 budget to plug other financial holes.

Orlando's housing crisis, though, can't be fixed overnight with either of these proposals. Plasencia encouraged local officials at last week's task force meeting to steer evacuees to other places, like Marion County, where some jobs and housing may be more readily available.

"Our ability to provide affordable housing is something that is going to happen over the next two to five years, not over the next two to five months," he said. "We need

to look at options to help people now, and those options may not be in this immediate area."