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AFTAC civilian returns to duty after Hurricane Maria relief efforts

By Susan A. Romano, AFTAC Public Affairs

PATRICK AIR FORCE BASE, Fla. – “They have no power, no running water, limited transportation, little food, and the damage is unimaginable.”

Those are the words of Claudette Wells, an acquisition program manager for the Air Force Technical Applications Center here, speaking about the citizens of St. Croix, a U.S. territory. Wells recently returned from the island nation after volunteering to help with Hurricane Maria disaster relief efforts and spent six weeks on the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s Surge Capacity Force.

Shortly after the Category 5 storm barreled through the Caribbean, Greater and Lesser Antilles, the Department of Homeland Security sent a message to all civilian federal employees seeking volunteers to help those affected by Hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Maria. Wells jumped at the chance to assist in any way she could.



“I was lucky enough to have an employer who was willing to let me go for 45 days, a desire to help those in need, and a wife who knows what I find rewarding,” said Wells. “After seeing the devastation in Houston after Hurricane Harvey, I knew I had to do something to contribute to the relief efforts that hit so close to home here in Florida.”

Once Wells got the go-ahead from her local chain of command, she flew to Anniston, Ala., where she received what’s called “just-in-time” emergency response training – a condensed course that provided basic information on how to handle the needs of those affected by the catastrophe. She was also issued a laptop and cell phone she would need for the duration of her temporary duty.

From Anniston, Wells flew to St. Croix and landed at Henry E. Rohlsen Airport in Frederiksted on the western tip of the island, where she was met by other FEMA disaster relief personnel. Once on the ground, she was initially tasked with conducting Disability Integration operations – work that involved following up on referrals for citizens with functional disabilities or unmet needs.

“I worked with folks who had vision, hearing, mobility or cognitive disabilities,” she said. “We helped connect them with local agencies that provide a specialized service to those with a particular disability, and we helped identify and distribute the durable medical equipment they needed like canes, walker and wheelchairs.”

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After several days of work on the DI team, Wells was transferred to the Individual Assistance group. There, she worked with a small cadre of surge personnel and made more than 1,000 calls to victims who had already filed paperwork with FEMA and needed additional medical assistance. “We usually had to make multiple calls to the same number because of the poor cellular network, and some we just were never able to reach,” she lamented.

Wells also spent time with the Disaster Support Assistance team, which was responsible for canvassing certain geographical areas to make contact with those most impacted by the storm.



“We’d go door-to-door – always in the buddy system – to determine if residents had registered for assistance or not,” she explained. “If they hadn’t, we’d offer to register them right there on the spot. That is, if we had connectivity. If cell service was down, we’d fill out a form and upload it to FEMA’s database when we returned to the ship.”

The ship to which Wells referred was an aging Carnival Cruise Liner, the Fascination. Carnival docked the 2,056 passenger ship in St. Croix after receiving a partnership request from FEMA, and the vessel’s certified crew members provided housing and meals to relief workers.

“It was a bit surreal to spend my days under extremely austere conditions, witnessing the abject conditions the people of St. Croix had to endure, then turn around and return to a luxury cruise liner with great food, air conditioning, running water and electricity. It was very humbling and made me realize just how fortunate I am,” Wells stated.

Wells, a retired U.S. Navy officer who has been with AFTAC since 2003, rates this event as one she will never forget.

“What struck me the most about this entire experience was the patience of the disaster survivors,” she said. “When I arrived at St. Croix, they had already been without power for more than three weeks. Things like clean drinking water and fuel were scarce, but they weren’t out there looting or complaining or rioting. They seemed genuinely grateful for the presence of FEMA and its volunteers, and just about everyone I came in contact with thanked us for being there.”

She added, “I was just a small cog helping a very large machine help people in need. And if my wife Helen hadn’t been willing to make the sacrifice to maintain our household by herself, I’m not sure I would have been able to make the trip. She was totally supportive from the start, and I’m glad I was able to be a part of the effort.”

According to the National Hurricane Center, Maria was the 10th most intense Atlantic hurricane on record and caused catastrophic damage to the islands of Dominica, Guadeloupe, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, and recovery efforts are still ongoing.