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October 2-6, 2017

Iowa National Guard deploys 24 airmen to Puerto Rico



Travis K. Fischer
Mid-America
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24 members of the Iowa National Guard have been deployed to Puerto Rico to assist in the recovery efforts in the wake of Hurricane Maria.

On September 26, 16 airmen from the 132nd Wing of the Iowa National Guard in Des Moines hitched a ride with eight airmen from the 185th Air Refueling Wing from Sioux City to depart to Puerto Rico on a mission to help their fellow citizens in their time of need.

Hurricane Maria, a Category 4 storm, made landfall on Puerto Rico on Wednesday, Sept. 20, berating the island with 150 mph winds and rainfall measured by feet instead of inches. Already struggling to recover from a near miss by Hurricane Irma just weeks before, the direct hit from Hurricane Maria has thrown the U.S. territory into chaos. Roads have been destroyed, communication capabilities are strained, and power is out across the island. Many of Puerto Rico's 3.4 million residents are without running water and are struggling to find food and fuel.

"They have a long, long road ahead in Puerto Rico," said Col. Greg Hapgood, Director of Public Affairs with the Iowa National Guard. "We're one of the responding states that said we have certain capabilities that can help solve a problem."



Security Forces from the Iowa Air National Guard's 185th Air Refueling Wing (Sioux City) and 132nd Wing (Des Moines) were deployed to Puerto Rico on Tuesday, Sept. 26 to assist in the recovery efforts following Hurricane Maria. (Credit: Sr. Master Sgt. Robert Shepherd, Iowa Air National Guard)

In the aftermath of the hurricane, Puerto Rico has requested support from National Guard units across the country under the Emergency Management Assistance Compact, a mutual aid agreement between the states and territories to help each other in times of crisis. When disaster strikes and a state of emergency is declared, the impacted state or territory assesses their needs and makes requests for resources or personnel that other states respond to.

The Iowa National Guard is answering the call for support to supplement Puerto Rico's civilian law enforcement officers. The 24 airmen deployed to the island are handpicked volunteers who will work alongside local police to help maintain law and order as they recover from the disaster.

"Some of them may work in civilian law enforcement, but they're all trained by the military

to be police officers," said Hapgood.

It's unknown exactly how long the airmen will be deployed, but they have taken with them everything they need for two weeks worth of service: not just policing gear, but food, water, and even portable generators.

"Right now it's an indeterminate amount of time how long they will be on the ground in Puerto Rico," said Hapgood. "A typical mission for us in a disaster response is two weeks, but they're prepared to stay as long as they are needed."

Hapgood says that Iowa is blessed to have such dedicated volunteers serving in the National Guard, but also expressed gratitude for Iowa's employers, who go to great lengths to accommodate the absence of the volunteers.

"We are incredibly grateful to their employers for allowing them to go on such short notice," said Hapgood. "We can't do what we do without the support from Iowa employers."

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