

# Puerto Rico student influx in Camden

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CAMDEN - Elba Ramos, like any proud grandmother, beamed as she showed photos of four of her grandchildren, each smiling broadly in their brand-new school uniforms. She laughed as she showed video of the youngsters, ages 4 to 8, playing in the mid-December snow, the first they'd ever experienced.

But Ramos' Camden home is a lot more crowded than she's used to, as her three daughters and four grandchildren have all been forced to join her here after losing their own homes in Puerto Rico when Hurricane Maria struck the island Sept. 20.

Water flooded the home where two of

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them lived, she explained in Spanish, while the roof and top floor was torn off another daughter's home.

"I don't think I can support them all," she told a reporter as Carmen Rodriguez interpreted. "I have to help them get help. It's been hard... My daughters have all been depressed. We've tried to keep the kids' mind off (losing everything) by keeping them busy."

The kids, though, could play in the snow and stay warm with coats, hats and gloves, and had uniforms for school after receiving clothing vouchers, which Ramos was able to get thanks to assistance from her grandchildren's new school.

Rodriguez, a special adviser for bilingual education for the Camden School District and a Camden County Freeholder, has been helping the district cope with an influx of at least 65 students from 28 families who've left the devastation on the island.

Some have arrived in South Jersey with little more than the clothes on their backs - clothes suited for a warm Caribbean island, not a harsh Northeast winter. Well-intentioned relatives who took in family members

may have found landlords who didn't want rental units to be overcrowded; others, already struggling to make

## See STUDENTS, Page 8A

ends meet in a city with a poverty rate approaching 40 percent, simply didn't have the wherewithal to offer more than shelter.

Children needed coats, school uniforms, backpacks and school supplies. Some, traumatized by loss and displacement, needed counseling. Their parents, many of whom speak only Spanish, need to find jobs as they come to the realization that they may not be able to return home for a long time - if ever.

Camden native Kyralis Figueroa, her two children and their father were all living in Puerto Rico when Hurricane Maria hit the island.

"We lost our roof," said Figueroa. "All of it."

Their home in Vega Baja on the island's northern coast was left uninhabitable. Only the bedrooms remained intact, and the family lost everything. Figueroa and her two children, ages 13 and 11, came to Camden to live with family.

"Everything's changed," said Figueroa. The children miss their father, who remains in Puerto Rico, coping with a lack of power and running water even as he works at an electric plant there.

Her daughter, Julymar Barrieto, shyly answered a reporter's questions in Spanish as her mother translated. At Veterans Memorial School in East Camden, she's able to take advantage of bilingual instruction, and is slowly making friends.

The district, Figueroa said, has seen to many of her children's needs.

"They've helped in every way possible," she said. "They've helped us get vouchers for food. They've gotten clothing and bookbags and school supplies for the kids. They made sure they have everything they needed to start going to school here."

"The needs are wide-ranging," said Kevin Hickey. The executive director of Catholic Charities in Camden, Hickey has been in touch with a staff member



who's on the ground in Puerto Rico, and said the situation there is still dire for many.

"It's hard to pin down how long this will go on," he said. "Life there is still pretty grim."

Catholic Charities has assisted 67 families throughout the Diocese of Camden, which encompasses Camden, Gloucester, Cumberland, Salem, Cape May and Atlantic counties, Hickey said. The charity has worked with its counterpart on the island, Caritas Puerto Rico, in helping evacuees resettle throughout South Jersey, primarily in Camden but also in Cumberland and Atlantic counties.

Earlier this month, Catholic Charities gave out more than 100 coats donated through a post-hurricane coat drive, along with hats, gloves, scarves, winter clothes and basic supplies like toiletries, diapers and wipes.

"The outpouring was great," Hickey said. "I think we were all stunned by people's generosity."

But the need is still there, and might grow as more families make their way off the island.

The district is connecting those families with social service agencies including Catholic Charities, the Food Bank of South Jersey, CamCare, the Hispanic Family Center, Project Hope and the Salvation Army (through the Kroc Center in Camden). It's also helping evacuees secure emergency food and housing assistance.

But Rodriguez and school officials fear that some of that assistance may soon disappear: The deadline for food assistance through the state Department of Human Services Division of Family Development was Oct. 31; the deadline was Dec. 31 for evacuees to ap-

ply to the same agency for cash and housing assistance.

DHS spokeswoman Nicole Brossoie said in an email to the Courier-Post that "no one is being cut off from state or federal benefits."

As U.S. citizens, evacuees are entitled to FEMA and other federal benefits, which they can obtain with assistance from county welfare agencies. County workers throughout the state have been "noticed with regard to evacuee benefits and how to process their applications," Brossoie added.

"In addition, the state is working closely with FEMA, [NJ 211](#) and (Voluntary) Organizations Active in Disaster," she continued. "Staff is also outreaching local community-based Latino organizations and agencies to assure that evacuees are aware of FEMA benefits and getting the services they need."

The first thing evacuees must do to be eligible for aid is to register with FEMA by March 20. "It is critical for the provision of benefits that evacuees be officially recorded," she said.

Rodriguez, though, worries not everyone's needs will be met. Many of the people fleeing the island have lost the paperwork needed to apply for more permanent help like federal SNAP benefits; other have left because of a lack of work, power outages or other hardships, but still don't qualify for FEMA assistance because their homes are still uninhabitable.

The emergency measures put in place made it easier to obtain short-term assistance, Rodriguez said, but the flow of people from Puerto Rico continues as the island's problems with power, water and rebuilding stretch from weeks to months.