

Seeking Wi-Fi and cellphone signals in wake of Hurricane Maria

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People congregate at a Wi-Fi hotspot in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria with many cellphone towers down in San Juan, Puerto Rico, September 24, 2017. Photo by: AP Photo/Carlos Giusti

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico — Margarita Aponte and her family first had to clear the road in front of her house. Then they loaded into the car and drove an hour to San Juan, Puerto Rico's largest city. They were headed to the old telegraph building.

There, thousands of Puerto Ricans were looking for the same thing. They wanted a cell phone signal.

Puerto Rico is an island. It is a part of the United States and its residents are American. More than 3 million people live there.

Hurricane Knocks Out Cellphone Service

On September 20, 2017, Puerto Rico was hit by Hurricane Maria. A hurricane is a type of powerful storm. Maria was one of the worst in Puerto Rico's history. The wind and water knocked out power across Puerto Rico and destroyed many homes and buildings. Cellphone and Internet service were largely knocked out, too.

"It's ringing, it's ringing, it's ringing!" Aponte screamed. Her phone had connected to the free Wi-Fi.

Her eyes filled with tears as she talked with nephews, uncles, brothers and sisters in Florida and Massachusetts. It was her first communication with them since Maria.

There are two free Wi-Fi hotspots in at the telegraph building in San Juan. It is hard to get online, though. Most people there spend hours frowning at their phones. They are unable to connect.

Hits And Misses Finding A Signal

"There's no communication. We're in God's hands," Yesenia Gomez said as she left a message for her mother.

All over Puerto Rico, people are looking for a signal.

Carlos Ocasio picked his way through tree branches and broken glass bottles. Finally, he found a spot with a good signal. From there, he was able to reach his brother in New Jersey.

"My throat got a little choked up and I couldn't talk for a minute," he said. "They're calling me from everywhere, asking when I'm going to arrive."

For hundreds of thousands of Puerto Ricans living on the U.S. mainland, however, there has been only silence from the island.

New Yorker Not In Touch With Family On Island

New Yorker Shirley Rodriguez said she has more than 30 family members in Puerto Rico. She is most worried about her 66-year-old mother, Mildred Rodriguez. Mildred has diabetes and lung problems.

Rodriguez last spoke to her family before the storm. At that point, her family was planning on being together for it. Since then, calls to their cellphones have gone to voicemail.

She said that not knowing what had happened was very hard.

Only about 25 percent of towers were working in the San Juan metro area.

Hopeful Signs Service Will Be Back On

Cell service provider T-Mobile said it reached a deal with other providers to help reconnect their customers. It said customers would not be charged extra.

Governor Ricardo Rossello said a major underwater cable had been repaired. This would allow people to make long-distance calls and improve Internet service. Two planes from Spain's telephone company also arrived over the weekend to help re-establish services.

Despite the difficulty, people keep trying to reach their loved ones. In many cases, the key has been not giving up.

Some people occasionally offer help. "I didn't move my phone around, and I got a signal," said one helpful woman.

But For Some, Still "Zero Communication"

Nearby Sylvia Calero tried to reach three brothers and three grandchildren in another part of Puerto Rico. She spent an hour walking, unable to find a signal. She then drove to the free Wi-Fi hotspot.

"Zero communication," she said.

Wanda Nieves, a government worker, went to one of the Wi-Fi hotspots too. She was finally able to connect. She spoke to her family in Florida and Michigan. She said she did not plan to return for more calls or messages.

"We've already given signs of life," she said. Now, she said, she would wait for Puerto Rico to rebuild.