

Puerto Rico looks to Project Loon balloons to restore cell service

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A Project Loon balloon is filled in February 2016. Photo by: Project Loon/Google Plus

Hurricane Maria was a huge storm. It started over the Atlantic Ocean. Then it landed in Puerto Rico.

The island of Puerto Rico is in the Caribbean Sea. The island is part of the United States. The people of Puerto Rico are Americans. The storm hit them more than three weeks ago. Rain and wind from the storm caused a lot of trouble. Lots of people on the island have no phone service and power. The storm broke the whole power grid. Even three weeks later, many Puerto Ricans still lack these important services.

Some help could be on the way. Alphabet, the company that owns Google, has a plan. It is going to send big, see-through balloons to the island. The balloons could bring back communications for most of the people.

Balloons That Float Like Jellyfish

The balloons look and move like flying jellyfish. Alphabet wants to float the sun-powered balloons above Puerto Rico. The balloons will create phone and text message service.

It is unclear when the balloons might arrive. The United States told Alphabet they can send 30 balloons.

The balloons can talk to one another with laser signals. The signals can move from machines on the ground to the balloons. Then the balloons can send signals to people's phones.

Many Cities Have No Signal At All

Help cannot come soon enough. People have been trying hard to get cell service. They want to talk to one another and with family and friends living off the island.

Giovanni Collazo makes phone apps. He says that phones have been working OK in big cities. Calls and text messages often work. But other Internet service is slow and “fails all the time.”

Phone service isn't the only thing people are worried about. Many people have no power. They cannot keep their phones and homes powered.

The situation in cities is bad. On other parts of the island it's even worse. Many cities have no signal at all. Because of this, people go to any area where they can get service. Sometimes they have to drive for a long time to get there.

The Next Steps

TV and radio stations have been talking about the balloons. This is how some people know they are coming. But a lot of people do not know how the balloons will work yet.

Alphabet says it will work hard to finish the plan.

There is one problem. A company called Space Data Corporation is trying to stop Alphabet. The company said that Alphabet unfairly used some of its ideas. They might stop the balloons. This would be bad for the plan to help Puerto Rico.