



# WPI

## Las Carolinas Community Hub: Unifying Progress with El Centro de Apoyo Mutuo

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**Las Carolinas Community Hub: Unifying Progress with El Centro de Apoyo Mutuo**

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Bachelor of Science

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El Centro de Apoyo Mutuo  
Municipality de Caguas

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## Abstract

Puerto Rico has faced many challenges including economic, environmental, and political. Often the insufficient response from the local and federal governments generates immense demands for community organization and resilience. In 2017, after the devastation of Hurricanes Irma and Maria, Rosario González, and other residents of Caguas, broke into the abandoned María Montañez Gómez elementary school of Las Carolinas, Caguas and opened a food kitchen for her community in crisis. Over the years, she and a team of volunteers have come together to provide food and services for the elderly. Our goals are to assist the CAM in planning with the municipality for future directions, provide outreach for their space, and generate resources for their promotion and growth. We realized these objectives by creating a presentation and brochure, budgets, databases, a real-estate catalogue, and painted a parking lot for the cultivation of their organization. After accomplishing these goals, we were able to leave them with valuable contributions to the evolution of their organization and place of operation.

## Acknowledgements

During our time in Puerto Rico, we were only able to accomplish our objectives because of the incredible help and assistance from our advisors, project site directors, the amazing women at CAM, our cohort, and many others.

We would like to specifically thank our advisors Dr. Grant Burrier, Dr. Scott Jiusto, and Dr. Sarah Molinari. Without their steady encouragement, guidance, and advice, our project would not have been able to succeed. Thank you for your efforts, revisions, and spirit that has spanned our time since the beginning of ID2050. A special thank you to Dr. Sarah Molinari for connecting us with the leaders of CAM Las Carolinas, the Municipality of Caguas, members of the community, providing us with amazing research material, as well as her Spanish translations in times of need. Thank you, Scott, and Grant, for working tirelessly to help us rebuild our project after the initial one ceases to exist. When we reached the ground in Puerto Rico thank you for helping us redefine our objectives to fit the needs of the leaders of the CAM. The ability for this experience is irreplaceable in our lives and we are eternally grateful for being with us every step of the way.

In addition, we would like to thank all the women who volunteer at CAM Las Carolinas, specifically Charito Arroyo and Rosario González, for not only receiving us with open arms but also for their willingness to collaborate with us. We would like to thank them for their willingness to open their hearts, share their personal stories that have left an impact and for inviting us into their home and lives with open arms. They provided valuable information through interviews, the lunch runs, their cooking, and atmosphere. The efforts the women at CAM have taken to provide support for their community displays their beautiful strength, character, and hearts that they extend to all they welcome. We hope our project continues to benefit them and progress them even further in their journey as they continue to break new ground, acquire nonprofit status, and receive formal building permits.

Our cohort was also an incredible source of teamwork and perspective, and every project was a great source of inspiration. The collaborations across projects with similar goals were enlightening to build off each other's work and come together to brainstorm new initiatives that would benefit all communities that need support.

A special thank you to the Municipality of Caguas for their support for the CAM and progression of the mission and efforts as well as providing us with a tour of other communities to help brainstorm and bring new initiatives and insights that would benefit the community of Las Carolinas. Thank you for also giving us a tour of the town of Caguas through museums and landmarks that are historically and culturally related to the municipality's excellence.

Finally, we would like to thank the people of the community of Las Carolinas. Being an outsider looking in you have enveloped us with your beauty, stunned us with your charm, and touched our hearts to all we have met along our journey through our project. We were able to learn the history and culture that helped us understand and appreciate everything that surrounded us. You have shown us a different way of living, one of support for one another and the familiarity of the neighbors that you consider family. Despite the recent tragedies that they have faced they have shown their resilience, hard work, and leadership that is present every day. It is their kindness and hospitality that has uplifted our spirits and made this project unforgettable.

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## Executive Summary

For the last few decades, Puerto Rico has struggled with economic strife, outmigration, political unrest, and natural disasters. The government has suffered an ongoing recession since 2006, when tax breaks were revoked, and people and foreign business fled the island (“Why Puerto Rico Is in Trouble,” n.d.). In addition to the financial desperation, Hurricane Maria, and Irma in 2017, did roughly \$90 billion in damages to Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands (*Hurricane Maria’s Devastation of Puerto Rico* | *Noaa Climate. Gov*, 2018). The government has scrambled to try to mediate their situation by cutting funding to necessities like schools, health care, and social work (*Analysis | People Are Fleeing Puerto Rico, Guam, and Every Other u. S. Territory. What Gives?* 2022).

This modern landscape has forged large movements of community self-reliance among the people of the island. This resilience is highlighted across hundreds of organizations that occupy space in the developed and underdeveloped areas of Puerto Rico. One of these community centers is CAM, or El Centro de Apoyo Mutuo of Las Carolinas in Caguas. Las Carolinas, a small community in the heart of Puerto Rico, suffered extensive damage from Hurricane Maria and Hurricane Fiona, like the rest of the island. Out of the rubble came members of the area who refused to let their neighbors, friends, and family succumb to the poor provisions from the government. Six weeks after Hurricane Maria, Las Carolinas was still without water, power, and easy access to food. The single road in and out of the town had been damaged, making the aid even more inaccessible. This is when CAM Las Carolinas was created, as an initiative to help provide food for members of their community.

Since its formation, their operation has greatly expanded, and the leaders of the CAM will soon be acquiring the building permits from the Municipality of Caguas. Through these developments, they have added health care services for the community, a secondhand clothing store, and a fermentation center.

### Our Mission and Our Objectives

The goal of our project was to collaborate with El Centro de Apoyo Mutuo in Las Carolinas, Caguas, and the Municipality of Caguas to assist in developing their community center for their future. We accomplished this goal through the following objectives:

- Creating Content for Donor Opportunities
- Advertising their space
- Generating Post Title Acquisition Resources
- Improving their physical space

### Creating Content for Donor Opportunities

Through close collaboration with the leaders of the CAM, we were able to identify the need of creating content to advertise their work. We developed a brochure that highlights the early history of the CAM and shows their current abilities. The brochure also highlights their desire to expand into new avenues and how to contact the leader. Along with the brochure we prepared a presentation that contains more detailed information about the center. The purpose of

this presentation is so that the leaders can quickly explain to potential new partners or donors what is done in the CAM and how they could collaborate with them to support the needs of the community. This presentation will also be used in a conference at El Centro de Convenciones de Puerto Rico so they can spread awareness about their organization and the needs of the community.

## **Advertising Their Space**

As a blooming organization, they needed a way to encourage community interest in their available spaces. To facilitate this, we created a catalog for their available classrooms and workspaces. To get the room information, we measured the dimensions of the rooms and took notes of what is already available. Using this information, we modeled the entire school and mapped out all the rooms and we marked which ones were open for new partners. Once identified, we took pictures of each of them and added them to the catalog. We also used quotes from the interviews we hosted in our promotion for CAM. The rooms were also named according to the wishes of the leaders, using names that honored previous members of the CAM and current members too. The rooms also had 3D models generated to show how they could potentially look in the future, these are not meant to limit the user but inspire them about how the room could be transformed.

## **Post Title Acquisition Resources**

The CAM is currently in a transitional period where they are about to receive their nonprofit status, as well as the building permit from the Municipality of Caguas. The current vision for their future is that they will be able to fully use the space they operate out of now for renting the space and generating their own funding. With nonprofit status, they will also be able to apply for federal and private grants. We wanted to leave them resources for their future development, so we created the following deliverables.

### **Networking**

Having a strong network of like-minded individuals and organizations is extremely valuable to new nonprofits like the CAM. To facilitate an expansion of this, we invited Oscar Berrios to have a conversation about his organization, PICC, with our sponsor. PICC is another rescued school operation in Caguas that is well-developed and a great inspiration for other community centers. The meeting led to the exchange of a lot of important tips and information for the leaders of CAM.

### **Budget Sheet**

To ensure their future, they must be able to keep an organized record of their spending and funding. The Municipality agreed to pay for the building's utilities for the first year of their building permit, however, after that it is their personal responsibility. To help plan and manage these financial liabilities we created a multi-faceted budget sheet that can detail their yearly expenses and requirements. It includes revenue from grants, federal funding, donations, and

acquisitions from their rental agreements. It also will help predict their operation costs for food, maintenance, utilities, and other purchases.

### **Grant and Aid Spreadsheet**

Another aspect of their nonprofit status is the ability to apply for federal and private grants. As a nonprofit, they will be able to receive this aid free from tax reductions. However, the process of writing a cover letter, proposal, proposal budget, and application can be a time consuming and confusing process. To mitigate possible challenges with this, we organized a list of aid and grant sources with their contact information, website data, and type of aid. We then detailed information about avoiding grant fraud and exceptional free sources for learning how to successfully apply for grants.

### **Improving Their Physical Space**

A final aspect of our deliverables was being able to assist in organizing and improving their space. As a part of our real estate catalogue for them, we decided to paint parking lines, so they could use them for rental perks, as well as to make the space seem more professional. We also used extra paint to name each of the rooms on the premises. After conversation with the leaders, we decided to use the names of those they wanted to honor and remember. Some of them being of those who have passed and those who have contributed time and energy for the CAM.

### **Recommendations**

Throughout our project we actively took note of other avenues for projects and analyzed where we could take the deliverables of our project with more time.

#### **Use of Donor Materials**

During the creation of the brochure and presentation for the donor convention, we tried to prioritize our sponsors being able to use them after. They can be used for future avenues of donation and grant purposes.

#### **Further Networking**

We would recommend that our sponsors continue to pursue networking opportunities within the area of Caguas and other parts of Puerto Rico. Either through the Municipality or through other project opportunities that the WPI project center offers.

### **Conclusion**

This was the second project that was done in collaboration with El Centro de Apoyo Mutuo in Las Carolinas. Over the course of the semester, we got to work with and for the leaders at the CAM and were touched by their incredible character and work. Through the deliverables and accomplishments of this project we were able to support the growth and future directions of

the CAM. This project continued and nurtured the growing relations between CAM Las Carolinas and the WPI Puerto Rico Project Center. Throughout the project we strived to create a trusting relationship with the sponsors, as well as future partners the sponsors might have. We hope that the groundwork we established serves as footing for future projects, especially in the search of potential organizations that might want to set up their headquarters in the CAM campus.

Our team is grateful to have been given the chance to work with CAM Las Carolinas and the WPI Puerto Rico Project Center. We are eagerly waiting to be a part of the development of future projects that will advance the development of CAM Las Carolinas. We hope that our project outcomes serve as steppingstones for future projects and that they are of use for our sponsors. We expect that the Centro de Apoyo Mutuo de Las Carolinas will serve as a beacon of hope for community members and an example for the rest of Puerto Rico.

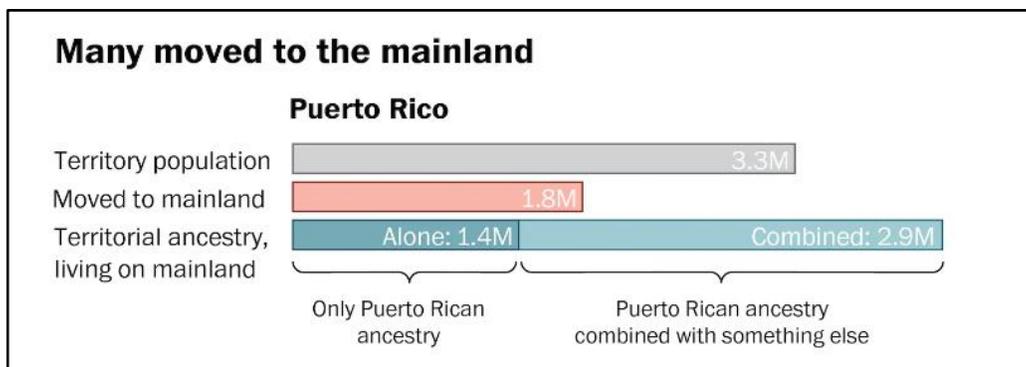
# 1. Introduction

When the rooster crowed and daylight bloomed upon the mountains of Las Carolinas, inspiration filled the air and the need to help the survivors of Maria was palpable. It was a balmy afternoon in October, 6 weeks after Hurricane Maria, when Rosario González took action and broke the lock of the María Montañez Gómez school. She changed the lives of the people of her community forever. Upon the arrival at the school, the former nurse’s mind flooded with memories of her childhood and her children.

One walks around Las Carolinas and sees a familiar face, but the leaders of El Centro de Apoyo Mutuo (CAM) see family. They have seen the suffering—the darkness, lack of food, and water but they have also always cherished the moments of celebration and togetherness. They started this transformation; a mission of mutual support, solidarity, and sustainability that protects the community and helps them manage the daily struggles of life in a marginalized community recovering from Hurricane Maria. The CAM is a place where people find peace, join as one family, and serve their community not for their benefit but out of the goodness and compassion they feel for those around them.

The formal definition of resilience is “an ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change,” which is exactly what the volunteers at CAM and their community demonstrate daily (Merriam Webster, 2024). However, after more observation, they are simply echoing the spirit of Puerto Rico. The island has historically faced many challenges, starting with Spanish colonization, the US colonization, financial crisis, and natural disasters.

Puerto Rico, an island with roughly 3.3 million people, is shrinking in population. Puerto Rican economists are concerned for the island’s financial state, with due cause. Currently, more Puerto Ricans live on the mainland United States than those on the island (Oakford, 2015). Economic instability rooted in colonial-capitalist relations has led to many problems such as the migration of the younger generations, economic productive generations away from the island, homelessness, failing infrastructure, political turmoil, and poverty.



**Figure 1:** Washington Post Migration Statistics

As a result, there is a ‘brain drain’ on the island (*Analysis / People Are Fleeing Puerto Rico, Guam, and Every Other u. S. Territory. What Gives?* 2022). A society’s future is based on its youth and these same educated young adults are leaving for mainland opportunities while their underachieving youth see the same vision of no outlets for support in Puerto Rico. The pipeline for the failed youth leads to addiction, the streets, or poverty. This also leaves older

generations of Puerto Rico vulnerable to crises that the youth can escape from. With a lack of funding for health care services and elderly care, it is up to those within communities to care for the elderly and ill.

This population and economic crisis, combined with Hurricane Irma, Maria, and Fiona, continues to catalyze community involvement and engagement. El Centro de Apoyo Mutuo Las Carolinas is one of many grassroots initiatives in Puerto Rico, and one of the many that WPI works with. Other project sites focus on centers like the cultural community center La Goyco in San Juan, or La Conde in Carolina. These spaces, along with hundreds of others around the island are stellar examples of adaptive reuse, as they have claimed abandoned schools and made them places of community support, cultural exploration, and self-reliance (Davis, 2023).

However, these initiatives are large undertakings for disadvantaged areas. They must struggle with obtaining legal rights to the building, securing funding, and volunteer retention (Davis, 2023). In the case of El Centro de Apoyo Mutuo Las Carolinas not only do they have a team of motivated, strong women, but the municipality to help them with their process. In our time collaborating with them, they were able to submit their 501(c)(3) form, as well as continue agreements with the municipality for the school's title. Our mission was to not only assist with these challenges, but also generate resources for them to use for grant acquisition, budgeting, space advertisement, networking, and volunteer efforts.

## **2. Background: Overview of Puerto Rico's Challenges and Community Resilience:**

### **2.1. Economic Instability and Outflowing Migration**

Puerto Rico's development through the 20<sup>th</sup> century shapes the present landscape of post-Hurricane Maria community resilience. Before World War II, economic subordination and underdevelopment had crippled the island's financial infrastructure and possibilities. By the 1930s, Puerto Rico traded almost entirely with mainland United States, with 95 percent of their exports going to the states and 90 percent of their imports being from the states (Dietz, 1976, p. 7). This centralization was solely focused on sugar production, with 44 percent of the island's farmlands focused on this agricultural monopolization (Dietz, 1976, p. 7). However, during World War II and after, the sugar economy became unsustainable. The global market began focusing on industry, and Puerto Rico's agricultural foundation was no longer lucrative. The US government sought to improve Puerto Rico's colonial economy and bring manufacturing and industry services to the island in the form of appealing tax breaks. Operation Bootstrap attempted to modernize the Puerto Rican economy, by allowing foreign corporations who established themselves in Puerto Rico to capitalize on lower costs of labor on the island (*Puerto Rico's Operation Bootstrap | Modern Latin America*, n.d.). Federal corporate tax exemptions were placed in policy, which led Puerto Rico to industrialize, urbanize, and encourage investment in the island (*Puerto Rico's Operation Bootstrap | Modern Latin America*, n.d.). Puerto Rico's new economic landscape was further complicated, as the 1976 tax break law created a tax loophole for US manufacturers to get away with paying pittance income taxes on the island (Kranz, 2017). While this can generate revenue for the Puerto Rican government by encouraging employment and economic opportunities, it hurts local citizens who are paying their full share of taxes. While Operation Bootstrap, as well as the section 936 tax emptions, encouraged exponential economic

growth, it created what many called an “economic bubble” (Fíonta, 2015). The mainland United States had been subsidizing Puerto Rico’s economy for almost a century, and in return had created an unhealthy reliance. By the time President Clinton took office, voters saw these tax exemptions as loopholes for large industry to skirt federal taxes. In return, section 936 was phased out over the next decade, marking the onset of the current economic crisis (Fíonta, 2015). The Puerto Rican bubble was officially popped and when the gavel finally fell in 2006, their economy entered a recession that it still has not recovered from (Fíonta, 2015).

### **2.1.1. Puerto Rico’s Debt Crisis**

With the federal tax incentives gone, once booming industries of Puerto Rico like pharmaceuticals, electronics, and textiles, began to flee the island (“Why Puerto Rico Is in Trouble,” 2016). The resulting recession contracted the economy and tax revenues. To balance out spending and borrowing—deficit financing—the Puerto Rican government recklessly issued “triple exempt” bonds—meaning they were exempt from federal, local, and state taxes. After almost a decade of pushing these bonds, creditor rating agencies downgraded the island’s credit in 2014, and by 2016, public debt topped \$72 billion (“Why Puerto Rico Is in Trouble,” 2016).

Puerto Rico’s status as an unincorporated territory meant that they could not apply for federal bankruptcy protection, the International Monetary Fund, or repeal the debt (“Why Puerto Rico Is in Trouble,” 2016). As a result of their debt crisis, their industry and their population were fleeing the island. Tax bases narrowed and overall revenue decreased; Puerto Rico’s economy was in shambles.

Eventually, in 2022, President Biden’s PROMESA board cut a bankruptcy deal with the government of Puerto Rico which reduced their debt by 80% (“Puerto Rico’s Future Is Looking Brighter,” 2022). However, this deal was a part of a long-standing political negotiation for a fiscal oversight board. On June 30, 2016, President Obama signed the PROMESA Act—or The Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act—which officially allowed Puerto Rico to begin restructuring its debt with the help of an oversight board (*Frequently Asked Questions*, 2024). With new tax distributions, it is estimated that going into 2030, their economy will be able to grow around 0.5% each year (“Puerto Rico’s Future Is Looking Brighter,” 2022).

The debt crisis limited the Puerto Rican government’s ability to spend money and respond to continued poverty, unemployment, and sluggish economy growth. As the government implemented austerity measures to reduce the debt, Puerto Ricans were faced with relying more on self-sufficiency. They could not count on the government to provide adequate public services like pensions, healthcare, and education. With an unemployment rate of 15 percent, the continued outflow of native Puerto Ricans to the mainland is crippling. The government cut pensions for teachers and police, diminished aid for low-income families, abandoned schools and buildings, as well as health care programs (Oakford, 2015).

## **2.2. Hurricane Maria and Puerto Rico’s Climate Disaster**

On September 20, 2017—only 13 days after the category 5 Hurricane Irma—Puerto Rico was struck by the tenth strongest Atlantic storm on record (*Hurricane Maria’s Devastation of Puerto Rico / NOAA Climate. Gov*, 2018). Hurricane Maria was a force all on her own, bringing about winds strong enough to destroy Puerto Rico’s weather radars, leaving researchers with only guesses as to what its highest winds were. Over its four-day reign, Hurricane Maria dropped over 15 inches of total rainfall and resulted in roughly \$90 billion of damage to Puerto Rico and

the U.S Virgin Islands (*Hurricane Maria's Devastation of Puerto Rico* | *Noaa Climate. Gov*, 2018).



**Figure 2:** Puerto Rico on September 25, 2017

Among that record breaking damage, was a death toll estimated to be around 2,975, however, and after investigation it is believed that that number is closer to 4,645 people (Guerra Velázquez, 2022). Hurricane Maria immediately destroyed all telecommunications on the island, effectively taking out around 95% of cell towers (*Hurricane Maria's Devastation of Puerto Rico* / *Noaa Climate. Gov*, 2018). Most of the island was in the dark without running water, as Puerto Rico's water is powered by their electricity. The people of Puerto Rico were stranded and, unbeknownst to them, victims of a rotting infrastructure now readily exposed in Hurricane Maria's aftermath.

### **2.2.1. The “Unnatural” Disaster of Maria**

To fully understand the true nature of Hurricane Maria's devastation, it is important to highlight the decades of malpractice, privatization, austerity, and neglect that set the stage first. The economic state of Puerto Rico, described in previous sections, led to extractivism, monoculture, and poor waste management (Ugarte, 2017). In the political scene leading up to the hurricane, government led environmental agencies disregarded the ecosystem's actual needs in bids to appease corporate demands. The Environmental Equality Board (EEB) filed a myriad of waivers in favor of capitalist interest (Ugarte, 2017). This disregard led to over aggressive construction on the coast which consequently destroyed natural protections from tropical storms, as well as mass pollution to the air, water, and land of Puerto Rico. The overall neglect and privatization of the island's utility foundations was also revealed. Even before Hurricane Maria, Puerto Rico's government had left the water and electricity operations to decline exponentially.

In one instance, the USGC abandoned 177 hydrologic stations to leverage the 2-million-dollar debt that the island's government owed them (Ugarte, 2017).

### **2.2.2. FEMA and Government Response**

In the wake of Hurricane Maria, FEMA's response and assistance to Puerto Rico came under intense scrutiny. Critics argued that the federal agency's efforts were insufficient and delayed, and that the island did not receive the same level of support as mainland U.S. states facing similar disasters. The U.S. Commissioner on Civil Rights even noted in 2022 that there were massive disparities between the FEMA response in Texas after Harvey versus Puerto Rico and Maria. Reports showing that in the first nine days after Harvey, Texas had received over 100 million in FEMA relief funds, compared to Puerto Rico's 6 million (*Report*, 2022). The slow and inadequate response from FEMA exacerbated the suffering and challenges faced by the people of Puerto Rico, leading to widespread public outcry and demands for accountability and reform. The struggles with hurricanes and FEMA's response have underscored the need for Puerto Rico to have more autonomy and resources to effectively prepare for and respond to natural disasters. Especially with most aid being federal, the people of Puerto Rico had to rely on themselves, or face unreliable channels of support. It was recorded that FEMA denied roughly 60% of the 1.1 million housing relief applications from the island due to missing evidence of property ownership (*Report*, 2022). There have been calls for greater federal support and investment in the island's infrastructure, as well as for reforms within FEMA to better address the unique needs of Puerto Rico and its residents (*Puerto Rico recovery*, 2021).

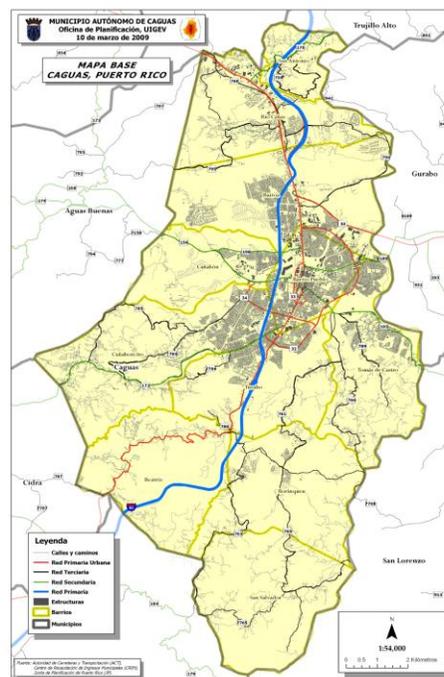
## **2.3. Community Resilience in Puerto Rico**

In the last 20 years, Puerto Rico has withstood economic and natural disasters. Highlighted in the sections above, both the federal and commonwealth government have let the Puerto Rican people down. As a result, the people of Puerto Rico have lost faith in their government, seeing officials as cronies and corrupt (Oakford, 2015). They have slowly made efforts to improve for the people, but it is self-sufficient community centers run by volunteers that provide mutual aid for others and have filled the gap that the community needs. Inspired by the needs of their people, grassroots organizations like CAM Las Carolinas, have pulled together to take over abandoned schools and buildings to bring back service to their neighborhoods. Throughout our project, we will highlight El Centro de Apoyo Mutuo and assist them in their mission to aid the elderly residents and their caregivers in Las Carolinas, Caguas. In the aftermath of crises like Hurricane Maria and amidst ongoing challenges exacerbated by colonial legacies and neoliberal policies, Puerto Rican communities have turned to mutual aid and solidarity as indispensable pillars of support. These principles, deeply ingrained in the island's social fabric, have become lifelines in times of governmental neglect and systemic failures. Through mutual aid initiatives, Puerto Ricans have come together to address immediate needs and confront broader structural injustices, fostering resilience and collective empowerment. From grassroots organizations to informal networks, the spirit of mutual aid strengthens community bonds and amplifies voices often sidelined by official channels. In Puerto Rico, mutual aid isn't just a response to crises; it's a testament to the enduring strength and solidarity of its people, embodying resilience in the face of adversity (Santiago Ortiz et al., 2022).

Despite the challenges and hardships, Puerto Rico has demonstrated resilience and strength in the face of adversity. The island's people have come together to support one another and rebuild their communities, while also advocating for greater recognition and assistance from the United States government. The aftermath of Hurricane Maria has sparked important conversations and actions aimed at addressing the longstanding issues of Puerto Rico's political status, disaster preparedness, and federal assistance.

## 2.4. Caguas

Caguas, located about 20 miles south of San Juan, is a municipality in Puerto Rico that was established in 1775. Its economy is built on trades such as tobacco processing, diamond cutting, and the development of leather, plastic, and glass goods (*Caguas / Caribbean City, Municipality, History / Britannica*, n.d.). In a 2020 U.S. census, the rough population was 127,244 (*Caguas, Puerto Rico*, n.d.). While municipal information is largely available, more specific information on the neighborhood of Las Carolinas, where our main sponsor is located, is harder to find. With one main road in and out of the community, it is as physically inaccessible as it is informationally. Land distribution and tenure in Las Carolinas was shaped by the *parcelas*, or land plot distributions, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and most of its current housing is documented from that original distribution. (Molinari, DATE). In the modern era, the town of Las Carolinas is a large collection of colorful houses, mostly elderly individuals, and gorgeous landscapes. There's one main store in the town, that also caters a bar. There are multiple churches, a kindergarten, a Community Center, which houses recreational areas, and then finally the abandoned María Montañez Gómez elementary school—where our sponsors run their operation.



**Figure 3:** Map of Caguas, PR

### 2.4.1. The Consequences of Maria in Caguas

Caguas, like most of Puerto Rico, was devastated after Hurricane Maria. While the mountains offered some protection from the high winds, the area still flooded heavily. There was damage from high winds too, trees were uprooted, and houses destroyed (*The Facts*, 2018). The town of Las Carolinas also suffered extensive damage. Residents were without water for three months, without electricity for seven, and did not receive debris aid for 80 days (Molinari, 2019). Many people within the community were left without housing and the proper support to live in the conditions. FEMA also insufficiently provided aid to the community. FEMA withheld disaster relief from many families due to questions about the legitimacy of house ownership. Many residents did not have the proper paperwork documenting ownership, with FEMA even labeling Las Carolinas a “squatter community” in a 2011 memo (Molinari, 2019). Because of this official demarcation, many areas of Las Carolinas were ineligible for housing repair aid. In combination with this aspect, FEMA also lacked an official presence in the area. They did not have an office in Caguas until 2 months after the hurricane and Las Carolinas did not have access to an office till 2022, which is a staggering five years after the disaster (*Fema Disaster Recovery Center Now Open in Caguas | Fema. Gov*, 2017).



**Figure 4:** Housing Juxtaposition in Las Carolinas, Caguas

## 2.5. CAM: History and Mission

November 6th, 2017 was the birthdate of El Centro De Apoyo Mutuo. On that special day, 6 weeks after hurricane Maria, the locks of the once María Montañez Gómez elementary school had been broken. With no electricity for 6 months and no water for 2 months it was time for someone in the community to rise and be a beacon of light to outshine the dark months that had previously shadowed their hopes. The center transformed itself into a self-managed, community-driven initiative, now being a haven for people who need healing, care work, and education for long term recovery and local transformation (Molinari, 2022). El Centro de Apoyo Mutuo Las

Carolinas is not the only community center in Puerto Rico. They have centers that operate out of 12 different locations within their network, including support centers in Lares, Mayagüez, and Santurce. This network provides community support focused on social orientation and activism that is designed to aid the elderly, homeless, and struggling members of their neighborhoods (“This Is Caguas,” n.d.).



**Figure 55:** The CAM Staff

El Centro de Apoyo Mutuo prides themselves on their mission of upholding their essential values in tandem with servicing their community. The center has five principles that they believe encompass who they are as a network. The first principle is mutual support which displays their collaboration and connection within community members that highlights the importance of power sharing and direct participation of the people. (*Red de Apoyo Mutuo*, n.d.). The women of CAM operate as a collective not recognizing one leader but upholding all of them to be equal leaders of the community in which they serve. The second principle they hold true to their hearts is solidarity. They uphold their daily actions based on respect, empathy, and understanding of the needs of others as well as prioritizing the collective good (*Red de Apoyo Mutuo*, n.d.). The third pillar they uphold is their concept of community sovereignty framed in their vision of social change and confronting structural violence in their community. The fourth value they prioritize is sustainability, letting nothing go to waste. An example of this initiative is Anna leading the recycled furniture store. She receives broken or donated furniture, transforms it, then gives back those pieces to help community members in need. She tells her story through her faith and belief in helping others who are afraid to receive assistance. She explains to the people with every piece she distributes that the government has their back and will help them as they have helped her in her time of need. They put forth the importance of building projects that can stay in the long term such as the fermentation space, the activity center, and many more rooms that they have occupied and running in their establishment. (*Red de Apoyo Mutuo*, n.d.). The last value is justice in the belief that everyone has a right to a dignified life without marginalization (*Red de Apoyo Mutuo*, n.d.). They envision their center as a place where people

can gather, enjoy the people of their community in celebration, and share in a place that can fulfill the services to help one another survive through any hardship.

CAM offers many services to address the basic needs of the community such as a food kitchen that operates Tuesdays and Thursdays providing lunches to members of the community. They split into two different lunch routes that cover all houses in need of nourishment in the community for individuals and their respective families. Other services they provide are a thrift shop, furniture repair shop, emergency safe house, fermentation space, and an activity room for the elderly where they host talks, play dominoes, receive education, and do interactive workshops (Molinari, 2019). Other than services, the center often partners with the Resident's Association to develop a community aid in doctors' clinic twice a month, dentist visits every three months, and even nutritional students from the school of medicine helping with the improvement of the community's diet. The dental visits take down their medical history and go door to door to people in the community who are bedridden or handicapped. They also receive a lot of aid from local government, politicians, the girl scouts, the Puerto Rico Responders Inc., SANOS, and other organizations that come to Las Carolinas to help the community like us.

### **3. Methodology**

Our project focused on facilitating relationships between community aid organizations and small businesses/organizations within said community. In order to do this, we needed to hear feedback from the people within CAM Las Carolinas, their current partners, the people they serve, their donors, and the government that they deal with directly. We approached this problem with the objective of using past research to build a solid foundation on how facilitating a good relationship between CAM and the local government can affect their community. Another objective was to use in-person methods to collect primary resources for our research. We utilized one on one interviews, as well as group interviews to get a sense of where the members of CAMLC stood with their current partners, as well as their openness to working with small new businesses/organizations. Additionally, we went on a tour of neighboring community centers to gain insight/ideas for the CAM. Below is a detailing of the approach we used to accomplish our objectives, as well as their limitations and concerns.

#### **3.1. Archival Research**

Our first objective was arriving with an in-depth understanding of the scope of our project. Through extensive research, we have collected information that outlines the story of how our project is going to aid CAM. First, we approached the history of the island, Caguas, Las Carolinas, and then the devastating effects of natural disasters like Hurricane Maria. This brought forth the importance of our sponsor, their foundation and upbringing that came about from the devastation of Maria, and the role they played in support of the community. Next, we followed CAM's initial cause and then did active research on their current role in Las Carolinas. At this point in our methodology, we focused on how CAM achieving non-profit status would affect the community, CAM itself, and their relationship with the local government to facilitate a wider impact for the community.

While on the ground, we continued this research while also consulting more primary sources, as detailed in the following sections of our methodology.

### 3.2. Interviews with CAMLC

Our first priority once we arrived on the ground in Las Carolinas was introducing ourselves to the CAM volunteers and the community. As we had anticipated a potential distrust from some of the residents, we took proactive steps to integrate ourselves into the community. Volunteering at CAM and assisting with lunch preparation and delivery were key to establishing connections and overcoming this challenge. We became acquainted with lunch route recipients, fostering dialogue, as well as addressing any inquiries about our project.

Following this, our next priority involved conducting interviews with the members of CAMLC. These women offered valuable insights into topics such as the Las Carolinas community's response to disasters, resource availability, the struggles CAMLC has faced themselves, as well as their vision for the future of the center. Themes identified in these interviews informed our proposal for new partner opportunities for the CAM to work in the abandoned school space and wants/needs of the CAMLC members, as well as the broader community. The one-on-one interviews conducted as a part of our methods were carried out with prior preparation and structured questions, but with a comfortable and constructive atmosphere (Flynn, 2018). Following this introductory work with CAM Las Carolinas, we visited various neighboring community's mutual aid centers in hopes of gaining some insight/ideas of what CAMLC is doing effectively and some areas in which our team can aid in improving their operation. These sites included San Salvador's rescued school, PICC in Borinquen, and I.S.O.M.O.S's aqueducts.

### 3.3. Ethnographic Record

Another method we utilized for this project was our own personal documentation of experiences and interactions whilst working on the project in Puerto Rico. In order to gain greater insight, as we interviewed, volunteered, and employed our previously noted methods, we took notes and maintained active records. These details aided us in painting the scene in our final proposal and research to fully immerse our audience in our project. This breakdown is described as an analytic ethnography as we documented the culture but also the interactions between our field research and the culture (Lune & Berg, n.d., p. 108).



**Figure 6:** On-Site Photos from CAM Las Carolinas

### 3.4. Limitations and Ethics

The largest limitation we faced in this project was the language barrier. Even though some of our group mates are familiar or fluent with the Spanish language, it was a hurdle that we overcame within our integration within the community. Another limitation that we faced was with our data collection and the reach our process is going to cover. We cannot account for all the responses of the people of Caguas in the allotted time that we are going to be doing groundwork. We will be able to get diverse and beneficial data, but our time unfortunately only lets us accomplish a certain amount of community feedback so much to help the community. Since we are an exterior entity from the community of Caguas, it will also be a challenge to determine how willing people are to open up to us for data collection. This is where we have analysis on the ethics of interviewing and collecting data from the communities we are working with. There will be a consent form composed for our interviews and we will ensure that the four main tenets of ethical data collection are followed— issues of harm, consent, privacy, and confidentiality (Lune & Berg, n.d., p. 43). Another step we are planning for surrounding the ethics of our methods is having a representative from CAM with us. It would help in building the element of trust between the people of Caguas and us, especially when at times we are asking for sensitive information. Despite our limitations in this project, our confidence was strong that we were able to adequately accomplish our goals for the project.

## 4. WPI and Our Work with CAM

### 4.1. Findings, Deliverables, and Research

WPI began collaborating with the CAM during C-Term 2024. They worked on two different deliverables for the organization, an emergency plan and demographic research on Las Carolinas. We are building on their work and collaborating with the women at CAM to establish concrete objectives for the work we are conducting. As we observe and speak with many of the volunteers, they have expressed sentiments surrounding issues like volunteer retention, community engagement, and financial status.

The woman at CAM fear that the center will live and die with them as they progress further in age without the help from the youth of the community of Las Carolinas. When asked about the future of CAM there is a consensus of this vision of hope for a center that provides relaxation and relief to community struggles as well as a place to gather and share in celebration of life and the family that surrounds us. The entrance of new people moving into the community provides a beacon of light for the CAM leaders, which ignites a new flame on their initiative to gain volunteers that share in the same selfless mission that they seek to follow every day. The community of Las Carolinas is tightknit and special. Their family is not defined by blood but by the people you wish to surround yourself with and share in the pleasure of each other's company. Upon visiting different areas there is a mural that describes the story of Las Carolinas to the people. Below you can see how the mural paints the picture of unity under the Puerto Rican flag. The mural reads “*una entrada, una salida, una familia*” meaning one entrance, one exit, one family. The legend tells a story of a community that recognizes this beautiful, enchanted island as their home, but the real home is within the people. The Puerto Rican people will always come in different shapes and sizes, but you will always see a familiar face in the community for generations to come.



**Figure 7:** Mural in Las Carolinas Community

El Centro de Apoyo Mutuo is a center that provides community relief, but it is so much more to the people of Las Carolinas. The center is a way for many members of the community to keep their mind sharp in battling old age and other underlying struggles. One of the strong women at CAM named Iris volunteers at the community center daily which also in tandem helps her manage her schizophrenia. Working at the center and engrossing herself in the company of others allows her to keep her mind sharp and body healthy. For others like Anna, it has served a different purpose in being a haven for her and her family. Anna has shared her story with us of first living in Chicago but having to leave because of her husband struggling with drugs and financial situation. In moving to Puerto Rico, she was able to receive relief from the government paying only one dollar for the house she lives in today. CAM has helped Anna get back on her feet and even find a newfound purpose to serve others. She had stated in her interview that she believes “God has blessed me, and it is now my turn to bless others.” Her ingrained faith and love for the community truly is an inspiring and contagious sight.

The importance of the mission of the leaders of El Centro de Apoyo Mutuo is not only found in their selfless nature to serve the community but their deep-rooted connection to the school in which they are established in. All but one of the women at CAM have attended the María Montañez Gómez elementary school as well as their parents and children. The push to preserve the school once filled with memories and joy is strong and gives them pride that they are carrying on the legacy that those of the school would have wanted. By saving the school and turning it into something great for community use it brings to light the nostalgia that connects them to a different part of their life prior to the climatic suffering the island has induced. Upon visiting other community centers that have been established in Caguas we see this trend of responsibility for the schools that have been turned into community centers due to the deep-rooted connection that the volunteers have with the space. An example of this is upon visiting the Proyecto Integración Comunitaria de Cañaboncito Inc., the founder Oscar Berrios, explains how the school rescue started as his own personal dream of transforming the abandoned school that

he once attended, as well as many members of his family, into a center that would provide resources of anything that a family would need. He stated in his interview “they are present every day we step in here.” This displays the responsibility he feels to maintain the school almost as a family heirloom and reclaim a place for himself and the community because of the sentiment and value associated with the building. He uses the community center as a place to give back to those in need and push others forward in life to provide for their families. The leaders of CAM spoke to Oscar at a networking session that we put together for them to connect the two communities who share in the same goals to discuss ideas to propel both to higher success.

There are many organizations and individuals that have partnered with the CAM to help the community such as local politicians that donate and visit the center, the girl scouts who provided much needed hands, the dentistry school of medicine that sends people to visit the community every three months for dental cleanings and checkups, and a collective of nutritionists from the school of medicine as well to help better the diets of the people of the community. They also have a special partnership with SANOS, a non-profit organization that has established physical, mental, and substance abuse health services.



**Figure 8:** Community Dentist Visit

We constructed different objectives from these meetings to focus on designing initiatives that they can use to further their mission. These deliverables included a presentation and brochure for a donor event, designing advertisements for their space, organizing networking collaborations, building their microenterprise presence, a budget sheet to keep track of their financials as they progress further in the non-profit status, and lastly painting parking lot spaces.

### 4.1.1. Donor Presentation and Brochure

To continue properly serving their community, the CAM needs financial support. The municipality of Caguas has stepped in and is working with them to attain the title for the María Montañez Gómez School so that they can finish their goal of achieving nonprofit status. They were invited to give a presentation at El Centro de Convenciones de Puerto Rico to spread mass awareness for their cause and possibly receive donations to further their mission and efforts in Las Carolinas. To ensure their success our team developed a brochure and presentation on who the leaders at CAM are, what services they provide for the community, the stories of the team of women that sacrifice their time and effort, and the vision that CAM foresees for itself in the future. The presentation did not only provide an insight into their everyday tasks but a true blueprint that presents their identity to all types of people. With the inclusion of striking visualizations of their operations and impressive statistics of the amounts of people they feed in their community, we hope to enhance their chances of securing the funding to help the maintenance of the CAM.



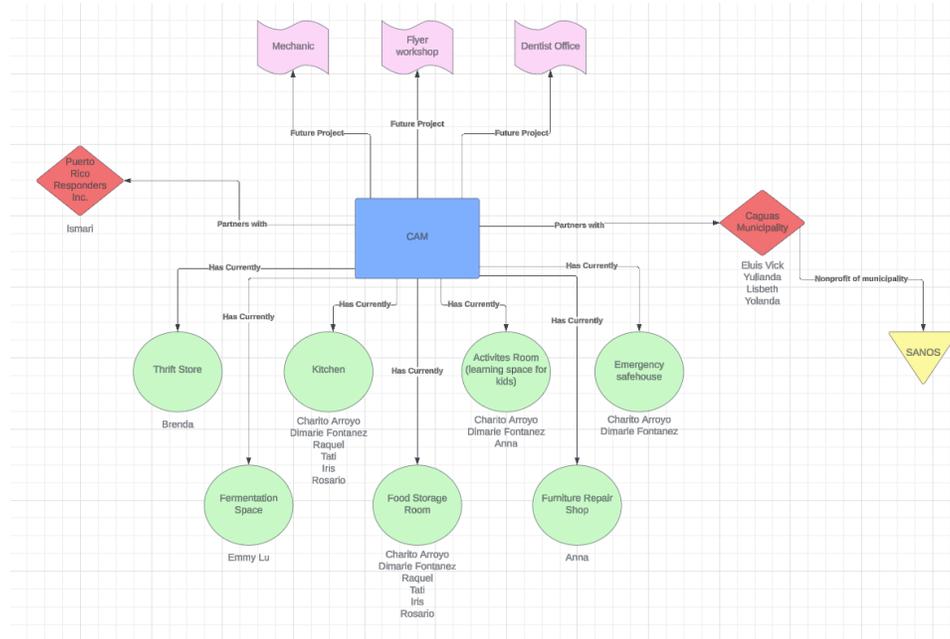
Figure 9: English Version of the Brochure

The brochure we created can serve multiple uses for the CAM and gives potential donors an idea of what this organization needs to complete their present and future goals. The brochure could also be a marketing tool used to gather volunteers around the community in Las Carolinas in the hope of inspiring individuals to participate. There is also a QR code that connects to their Facebook which is their main and most updated source of information of events they are hosting to the people of the community.

### 4.1.2. Microenterprise Structuring

At the start of our project, CAM was able to successfully submit their application for a 501(c)(3), their nonprofit status with the help of their hired accountant. They are also in the process of acquiring the use permits for the school in conjunction with the municipality, who will hold the title. CAM has recently received their employment identification number, which established them as a business in the eyes of the IRS but is still waiting on their status towards tax exemption abilities. In the coming months, they will be able to market and fill their available space with community focused microenterprises and collaborations that will not only help their current initiatives but provide shape to the greater vision CAM has for itself to be a hub for the people of the community to collaborate and create spaces of refuge and tranquility. Their current

operation hosts their food kitchen, a fermentation center, a clothing bazaar, a furniture repair shop, and an education space for older members of the community to complete their GEDs. They also are in the process of installing a space for SANOS, a municipal health care service, so that they can visit monthly to provide health services and information for Las Carolinas.



**Figure 10:** Organization Chart of the CAM

CAM also expressed their goals for the school and the different types of services they wanted to induct. They have plans to acquire a dental service to work in junction with SANOS as well as a cabinet maker and mechanic spaces. Multiple of the volunteers at CAM also mentioned focusing their services on primarily the elderly in the community. With services involving a space for elderly transportation, a space for members reliant on oxygen machines, and a center that holds computers and access to electricity in times of power outages to pay bills and other everyday tasks. In our conversations, they recounted the harrowing struggles that those depending on medical machinery face during power outages--without power there is no access to necessities as basic as the air they breathe.

Our deliverables focused on creating a catalog that not only features an accurate floor plan of their school, but also pictures and measurements of the individual rooms. These available rooms are meant to give future businesses an idea of what they will be working with if they choose to work in junction with CAM and their mission. We have included descriptions of the spaces mentioning the number of doors, outlets, windows, AC, electricity, and water access. This is followed by a brief description of the kind of work and efforts done at CAM as well as some headshots linking a face to a name with the members of the community. The catalog also includes a brief description of the types of businesses that CAM would be willing to partner with as well as the qualities that they look for. The final part of the catalog lists some testimonials directly from the leaders explaining what the center and the community of Las Carolinas means to them and how that motivates them every day to complete their work.



**Figure 11:** Title page of the Available Space Catalog

### 4.1.3. Budgeting Sheet

With the many moving variables of CAM in the process of achieving non-profit status the leaders suggested the need for a method to keep track of their finances and donations. While they have an accountant that they are collaborating with to keep track of the expense reports of the food purchases for their communal kitchen they need a template that is more organized with the coming additions of the microenterprises. In utilizing the tool Google sheets, that is not only extremely accessible but transferable as well, we were able to construct a budget sheet to account for their revenue and expense reports of their unique business operation.



time, but it is also good for their annual reporting's that they must complete and turn into the IRS at the end of each year to uphold and honor their soon coming tax exemption status.

Some results that were discovered from inserting their current numbers into the budget sheet have been their remaining balance and how it has been depleting over this past year. Since CAMLC has not gotten their tax exemption status it is harder for them to receive proper grants and donations from others. After the tragic effects of Hurricane Fiona in 2019, the CAMLC received a substantial philanthropic donation from the Collegiate College of New York. With the help of the municipality, local government representatives, the Girl Scouts, and other donations, CAM has been able to maintain itself with its initial donation for quite some time now. While this is an amazing donation the money will eventually run out, which applies pressure to find other sources of income. We hope that the introduction of microenterprises within the school will not only bring an exchange of services to help both parties and create a sustainable organizational model but also draw attention to the work our sponsors are performing in their cherished community.

#### **4.1.4. Floor Plan and Parking Space Planning**

One other deliverable we created during our time working with CAMLC was a floor plan of the Antigua Escuela Elemental María Montañez Gómez, the abandoned school in which CAMLC currently operates from. Developing this involved unlocking each of the classrooms that CAM has access to, taking measurements of the space, and then transferring this information into a detailed floor plan using the architectural modeling software, Revit. Additionally, while we were in the classrooms, we took account of the number of entrances/exits, windows, access to electricity/number of outlets, as well as any other important aspects of the spaces worth noting. Once in Revit, we color-coded the spaces based on our knowledge of what operations the CAM already uses certain spaces for and which rooms were open/available for small new businesses/organizations to inhabit in the future. We then used this floor plan, dimensions of the spaces, and room specs to create our previously mentioned 'available space catalog' in which each open space is advertised. Back in Revit, we mapped out the school's lot to see how many parking spaces would be able to fit. From this, we were able to buy the necessary supplies and create a parking lot for the abandoned school. Each open classroom was given two or more reserved parking spaces.

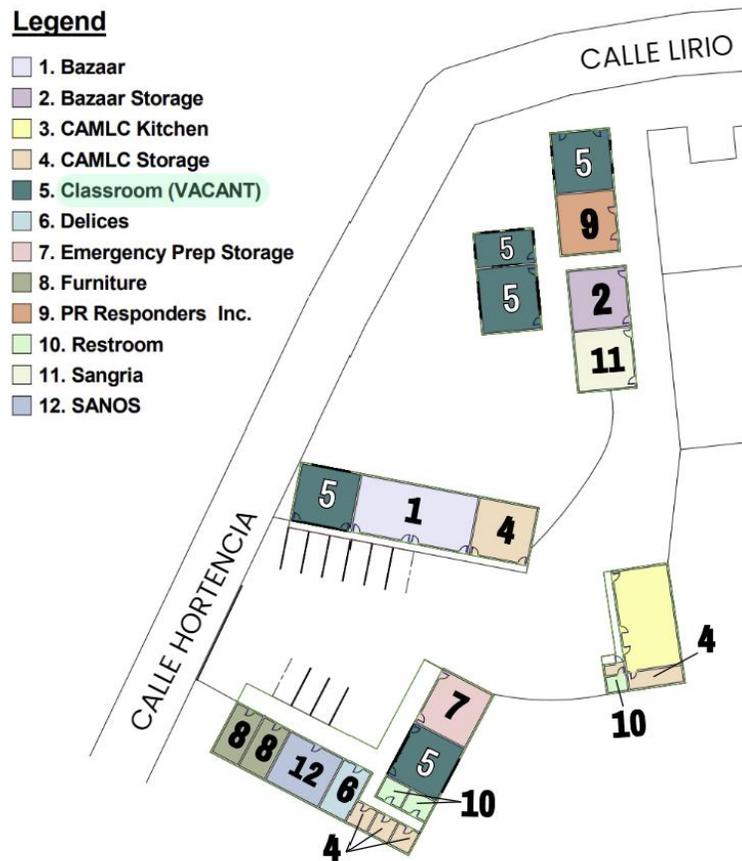


Figure 13: Floor Plan Layout

#### 4.1.5. Networking and Cross Community Assistance

Another aspect of developing CAM’s mission and ability was putting them into contact with other rescued schools and community centers. In the first week of our project, we had the opportunity to tour three other rescued schools and community initiatives of Caguas. This tour, organized by the Caguas Municipality, had us visit a rescued school in San Salvador, the community aqueduct system I.S.O.M.O.S, and the rescued school of PICC in Cañaboncito. Through these tours, we were exposed to many ideas to improve CAM and assist them in their development. The first rescued school initiative we visited was one in San Salvador which grows medicinal plants. They are the first model of a garden directed towards community use in Puerto Rico. They collaborate with doctors of nearby universities to validate and track their findings and hope to open these practices to the members of the community to promote self-sufficiency and good health. Every space in the garden targets a specific part of the body and they have been creating workshops to teach others the correct practice of planting.



**Figure 14:** Medicinal Garden Plots

The second place we visited was I.S.O.M.O.S, which is a 47-year-old and counting aqueduct project that started to fill the void of portable fresh water for the community. They were founded by community members with no experience in engineering and mechanics that were able to build this amazing facility run by only solar energy that serves about 180 families in the community. They carry enough energy in the plant to be powerless for a week and still be functioning. They also contain two tanks that both hold over 30,000 gallons of water with a natural built in biofiltration system. Their future hope for this initiative is the expansion and implementation of practice of portable water across the whole aqueduct company across Puerto Rico.



**Figure 15:** Water Aqueduct Tanks

We also spent time at PICC, an organization extremely similar to CAM. PICC is an organization that started as a community dream that was meant to provide a family with what they all needed. On our initial tour of PICC, we met their inspired leader, Oscar Berrios. Oscar has a strong emotional attachment to the school that PICC is in, having attended the school himself, as well as his parents and grandparents. He explains that the familiar faces of his community and the interaction with his fifth-grade teacher pushed him to restore and reclaim the school where he once spent a portion of his life into a hub where people can flourish and seek refuge. The only difference between the two was their level of development, so we organized a meeting with Oscar Berrios, which included us and the volunteers at CAM.



**Figure 16:** Picture of Meeting with Oscar

The meeting followed a chronological order in which we discussed PICC's beginnings, as well as their dealings with Municipality. The volunteers at CAM were able to ask a myriad of questions including those related to documentation from the Municipality, how they attracted certain services, and possibilities of collaboration with CAM. This allowed a connection between the community centers of CAM and PICC and many more that are indirectly related. The meeting of the two formed a relationship not only with each other but expanded both their networks to their supporters on each side. The CAM leaders have mentioned their interest in the link between an Alzheimer's care association and them possibly inhabiting one of the available space rooms because their missions correlate.

## 5. Recommendations

WPI's collaboration with El Centro de Apoyo Mutuo is a new opportunity, having only begun formally C term of 2024. There are many avenues for continuing our project as well as continuing work with CAM. As our sponsors acquire nonprofit status and sign over title ownership to the municipality, many doors will open for the organization. We have created many sources of information, tools, and various resources for the future of CAM and their responsibilities.

### 5.1. Utilizing the Resources for El Centro de Convenciones de Puerto Rico

On May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2024, CAM will be presenting to a large network of community health-related projects, community initiatives, and donors. For this convention, we created the presentation and added a multiuse brochure that they can distribute, and it was done with the intention of ensuring that their mission is delivered as accurately and professionally as possible. However, they have complete ownership of both the brochure and presentation. We hope that these are used for future awareness campaigns, either in person or on social media, and other events to receive funding that they might face in the future. We recommend that our sponsors take steps to create a larger presence online. Using the information curated on the resources we generated they could create:

- Scheduled Facebook postings
- Instagram posts, live, and other content
- YouTube video content
- A formal website
- Wall posters for their building
- Signs for the community
- News information

While these are just a sample of ideas, the overall vision is that they can use the brochure and presentation for more than the convention. The information they contain, as well as their design elements, could be a great source of inspiration for future applications or even volunteer awareness. In addition to these recommendations, we would like CAM to also be invited to more conventions like the one on May 2<sup>nd</sup> and have provided additional grant information for exposure to more of these types of events.

### 5.2. Generating Revenue and Rent

Another deliverable we focused on was designing an available space catalogue for CAM's open rooms. The catalogue was intended for organization purposes as well as future advertising. Once CAM acquires their title for the school, they can begin renting out the rooms they have open for more microenterprises. We discussed the exchange of services as payment as well as a contribution of whatever monetary amount they can spare in payment of utilizing the space for community advancement. A second aspect of this is that CAM will be liable for utility

payments after their first year as a nonprofit. This means that despite grant and donor funds, they might also have to rent their space to support the organization. We recommend that our sponsor use the available space catalogue to market the school for different community businesses like:

- A dentistry clinic
- A space for a mechanic
- Cabinet Making
- The Alzheimer's Awareness Campaign

All ideas were discussed with the CAM throughout our project. At the same time, we understood it was important to have a formally designed budget for the future operations of CAM. We developed a budget for our sponsor, and we hope they use this budget with the help of professional accounting, to ease their financial obligations.

We discussed revenue generation through other channels as well. During our meeting with PICC's director Oscar, he shared possible avenues for funding. For example, they hosted bingo nights at their school to help raise money. This would be a profitable channel for the CAM community and an initiative that brings everyone closer together. The idea for the CAM that we propose would be a casino night including games of dominos, selling of scratch cards, bingos games, and food. The money would be pooled into a raffle and baskets of food would ideally be given out to the participants of the community that attend the event. They could also partner with Vicky, a member of the community that has a flavored ice business that runs inside of her house as another sweet promotional treat.

### **5.3. Broadening Their Network**

Toward the end of our project, we were able to facilitate a meeting between CAM and PICC. This meeting was extremely successful and provided a great foundation for future collaboration between the two community centers. For future recommendations, we believe that CAM having the opportunity to have these conversations is imperative. Some possible connections already can be found within other project sites in the Puerto Rico Project Center.

- La Conde
- Taller Comunidad la Goyco
- Comunidad Organizada de San Salvador
- PICC
- AMA

Through these meetings they could compare operational systems and models, generate ideas, networking, and more avenues for accomplishing their goals. The addition of our physical deliverable, being the painting of the parking spaces, will allow much needed organization to the CAM if they are to have guests for future networking events. It will also work in favor of the renting spaces being able to allocate designated parking spaces as an addition perk given to renters who occupy the spaces within CAM.

## 5.4. Other Recommendations

There are many avenues for continuing work with El Centro de Apoyo Mutuo and in the future we hope that there will be many opportunities for WPI to partner with them. Depending on CAM's vision for their organization, there are structural outlets for projects. Taking inspiration from other projects, a garden, a hydroponic system, or even continuing the parking lot initiative we started.

Overall, we are satisfied with our work in Las Carolinas, and we feel hopeful that they will be able to use the resources we created to grow and expand their mission.

## 6. Conclusion

The journey that CAM Las Carolinas set off on is one of the many projects that are trying to transform Puerto Rico into a more prosperous and self-sufficient island. Once we arrived at the project site, we realized that the center was further ahead in its development than we expected. The center had already started its partnership with the municipality and was already on track to getting certain legal documents that were needed to advance the project further. Suddenly we were submerged in our sponsors' drive to secure the future of the center, however many steps the sponsors were hoping to take were still beyond the scope of our capabilities. For this reason, we took a step back and started working on short-term goals that would later boost their current long-term plans.

The objective of our project was to facilitate the outreaching methods for our sponsors, documenting their available spaces and creating material to let the public know who our sponsors are and what they do. Our team developed a document that lists their available spaces and what they can hold in said spaces. We worked on creating models that document our sponsors capabilities, staff and goals for the future which allow them to present their own campus to potential new funding sources as well as potential members that could be interested in assisting the organization. In addition to these, we've also created a list of funding programs they could use to apply and potentially receive more funding towards their project.

With these tools we laid the foundation for our sponsors to develop the center and promote the center to the public. Our project team hoped to assist our sponsors in grant applications, but many legal documents needed to classify the organization as a non-profit organization were still not in their hands. Instead of focusing on grant applications we decided to work on a different type of income. We developed documents that the sponsors could then use to promote themselves to other organizations that could be interested in joining them in providing services to the community. We also developed a short list of grants that they could then apply for once they get all their legal documents in order. The next step in this project site is to continue to assist the sponsors in their struggle to turn the abandoned school into a center that the community can rely on.

This project continued and nurtured the growing relations between CAM Las Carolinas and the WPI Puerto Rico Project Center. Throughout the project we strived to create a trusting relationship with the sponsors as well as future partners the sponsors might have. We hope that the groundwork we established serves as footing for future projects, especially in the search of potential organizations that might want to set up their headquarters in the CAM campus.

Our team is grateful to have been given the chance to work with CAM Las Carolinas and the WPI Puerto Rico Project Center. We are eagerly waiting to be a part of the development of

future projects that hopefully will advance the development of CAM Las Carolinas. We hope that our project outcomes serve as steppingstones for future projects and that they are of use for our sponsors. We expect that the Centro de Apoyo Mutuo de Las Carolinas will serve as a beacon of hope for the community and an example for the rest of Puerto Rico.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A: CAM's Brochure in Spanish

### Sobre Nosotros

El Centro de Apoyo Mutuo (CAM) Las Carolinas es un proyecto de autogestión creado por un grupo de mujeres residentes de la comunidad a seis semanas después del paso del huracán María en el año 2017. Está ubicado en los predios de la antigua escuela elemental María Montañez Gómez de la comunidad de Las Carolinas en Caguas.



Más Información:

 787-377-1441  
 787-942-3068  
 [camlascarolinas@gmail.com](mailto:camlascarolinas@gmail.com)  
  
 Las Carolinas, Caguas  






El Centro De Apoyo Mutuo



### Servicios Actuales

### Nuestros Compañeros

### Servicios Futuros

Cocina Comunitaria

Ofrece servicio de comida caliente a la comunidad más necesitadas. Adultos mayores, encamados y sus cuidadores. El servicio se ofrece martes y jueves.

Bazar

Proyecto comunitario en dónde se recibe ropa, zapatos y otros artículos de segunda mano y en buenas condiciones para ser revendidos a precios accesibles al público en general. También cuenta con un almacén en dónde se reciben alimentos no perecederos y artículos de primera necesidad

Delices

Proyecto enfocado en la recuperación de prácticas ancestrales de preservación de alimentos perecederos y la elaboración de remedios herbales. El mismo consta de dos vertientes: por un lado, la educación a la comunidad y por otro, la confección y venta de alimentos fermentados y herbolaria criolla.




Oficina de Dentista

El objetivo es mejorar la salud oral física y mental a través de la promoción de la salud bucal y la rehabilitación de los residentes de bajos ingresos mediante la sustitución de dientes perdidos de personas con falta de dientes total o parcial

Oficina de Doctor

Las promotoras de salud comunitaria (PSC) serán miembros confiables de la comunidad de Las Carolinas que tienen un conocimiento profundo de las necesidades de salud de la población. Esta relación permitirá que las PSC sirvan de enlace entre la comunidad y las instituciones de salud para facilitar el acceso a los servicios de salud

Microempresas

Fortalecer la sostenibilidad financiera del CAM al convertir el comedor comunitario, el bazar y otras actividades económicas potenciales en microempresas autogestionadas y solidarias capaces de generar sus propios fondos

Appendix B: Available Space Catalog

1

AVAILABLE SPACE CATALOG



# EL CENTRO DE APOYO MUTUO – LAS CAROLINAS

2024



787-377-1441  
787-942-3068

[camilascarolinas@gmail.com](mailto:camilascarolinas@gmail.com)



2



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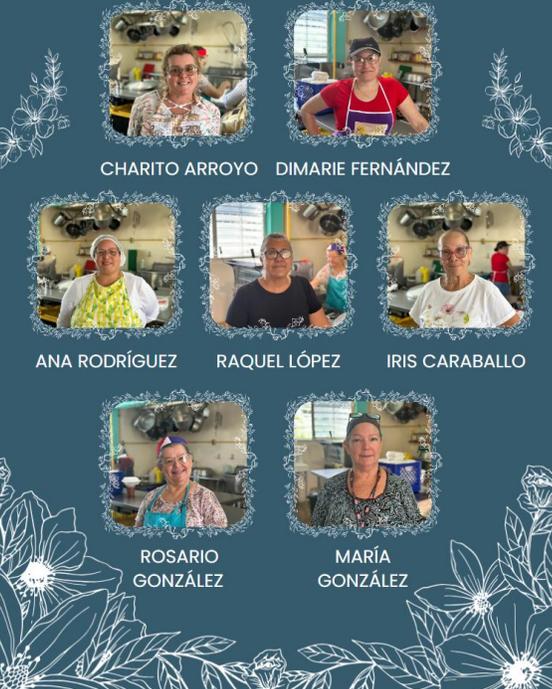
## ABOUT US

The Centro de Apoyo Mutuo (CAM) Las Carolinas is a self-managed project created by a group of women residents of the community six weeks after the passage of Hurricane Maria in 2017. It is located on the premises of the former elementary school María Montañez Gómez in the Las Carolinas community in Caguas. They provide hot meals to the most needy members of the community, including seniors, bedridden individuals, and their caregivers. The service is offered on Tuesdays and Thursdays.



4

## The Women of CAM



CHARITO ARROYO DIMARIE FERNÁNDEZ

ANA RODRÍGUEZ RAQUEL LÓPEZ IRIS CARABALLO

ROSARIO GONZÁLEZ MARÍA GONZÁLEZ



Together, let's  
make a difference.  
Join us at CAM.

ARE YOU A SMALL BUSINESS OR ORGANIZATION LOOKING FOR A SPACE TO THRIVE WHILE MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN THE VIBRANT COMMUNITY OF CAGUAS, LAS CAROLINAS? EL CENTRO DE APOYO MUTUO INVITES YOU TO BE PART OF OUR MISSION TO FOSTER MUTUAL AID AND COMMUNITY SUPPORT AT THE HEART OF LAS CAROLINAS.

LOCATED WITHIN THE OLD ESCUELA ELEMENTAL MARÍA MONTAÑEZ GÓMEZ, OUR AVAILABLE SPACES OFFER A UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY FOR BUSINESSES AND ORGANIZATIONS TO ESTABLISH THEIR OPERATIONS IN A DYNAMIC AND SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT. **WITH FIVE OPEN CLASSROOMS AWAITING TRANSFORMATION**, EACH SPACE IN OUR CATALOG PROVIDES THE CANVAS FOR YOUR VISION TO FLOURISH.

AT CAM, WE **PRIORITIZE VALUES OF MUTUAL AID AND COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT** OVER TRADITIONAL LANDLORD-TENANT RELATIONSHIPS. OUR PARTNERSHIP WITH INCOMING BUSINESSES AND ORGANIZATIONS IS BUILT ON THE PRINCIPLES OF EXCHANGE AND COLLABORATION, ENSURING THAT TOGETHER, WE CAN CREATE MEANINGFUL IMPACT BEYOND MERE FINANCIAL TRANSACTIONS.

WE ARE PARTICULARLY INTERESTED IN WELCOMING BUSINESSES THAT ALIGN WITH OUR COMMUNITY'S NEEDS, INCLUDING THOSE IN THE FIELDS OF HEALTH, ELDERLY CARE, AND RESOURCE PROVISION SUCH AS COMPUTER ACCESS. BY JOINING OUR COMMUNITY, YOU'LL NOT ONLY FIND A SPACE TO GROW YOUR VENTURE BUT ALSO BECOME AN INTEGRAL PART OF LAS CAROLINAS' JOURNEY TOWARDS RESILIENCE AND PROSPERITY.

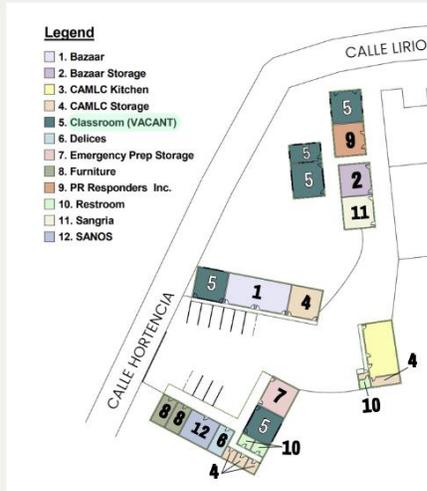
DISCOVER THE POSSIBILITIES AT EL CENTRO DE APOYO MUTUO AND BECOME A CATALYST FOR POSITIVE CHANGE IN CAGUAS. CONTACT US TODAY TO LEARN MORE ABOUT OUR AVAILABLE SPACES AND HOW YOU CAN CONTRIBUTE TO OUR SHARED VISION OF A STRONGER, MORE SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITY.

For more information call:  
787-377-1441 or 787-942-3068

FLOOR PLAN LAYOUT OF EL CENTRO DE APOYO MUTUO

Legend

- 1. Bazaar
- 2. Bazaar Storage
- 3. CAMLC Kitchen
- 4. CAMLC Storage
- 5. Classroom (VACANT)
- 6. Delices
- 7. Emergency Prep Storage
- 8. Furniture
- 9. PR Responders Inc.
- 10. Restroom
- 11. Sangría
- 12. SANOS

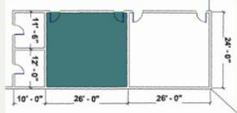


Rooms	Electricity	Water	Lights	Whiteboards	Big Windows	Small Windows	Outlets	Entrances
Salón Jose	Green	Red	4	1	8	12	9	2
Salón María	Green	Red	4	0	8	0	6	2
Salón Rosario	Green	Red	4	0	8	12	3	2
Salón Sara Cotto	Green	Red	2	1	8	12	3	1
Salón Iris	Green	Red	2	1	3	12	7	1

SALÓN JOSE

604 SQUARE FEET

- ELECTRICITY
- WHITEBOARD
- 9 OUTLETS
- 2 ENTRANCES
- 8 LARGE WINDOWS
- 12 SMALL WINDOWS
- 4 OVERHEAD LIGHTS



BEFORE:



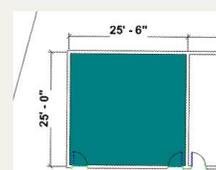
AFTER:



SALÓN ROSARIO

594 SQUARE FEET

- ELECTRICITY
- 3 OUTLETS
- 8 LARGE WINDOWS
- 12 SMALL WINDOWS
- 4 OVERHEAD LIGHTS
- 2 ENTRANCES /EXITS



BEFORE:



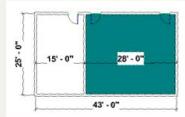
AFTER:



# SALÓN SARA COTTO

696 SQUARE FEET

- ELECTRICITY
- 3 OUTLETS
- 1 WHITEBOARD
- 4 LONG LIGHTS
- 2 FANS
- 8 LARGE WINDOWS
- 8 SMALL WINDOWS



BEFORE:



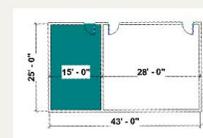
AFTER:



# SALÓN IRIS

375 SQUARE FEET

- ELECTRICITY
- 7 OUTLETS
- 1 WHITEBOARD
- 2 LARGE LIGHTS
- 3 LARGE WINDOWS
- 12 SMALL WINDOWS
- 2 ENTRANCES /EXITS



BEFORE:



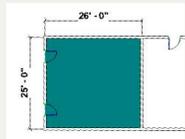
AFTER:



# SALÓN MARÍA

625 SQUARE FEET

- ELECTRICITY
- 6 OUTLETS
- 8 LARGE WINDOWS
- 4 OVERHEAD LIGHTS
- 2 ENTRANCES /EXITS



BEFORE:



AFTER:



## TESTIMONIALS

"AQUÍ NOS HICIMOS FAMILIA"  
-GLADYS GÓMEZ

"MI PARTE FAVORITA ES QUE TODOS (LAS CAROLINAS) CONOCEN A TODOS"  
-ROSARIO GONZÁLEZ

"YO ME CRÍE AQUÍ... QUIERO QUE SEA UN LUGAR DONDE LA GENTE PUEDA ENCONTRAR PAZ Y TRANQUILIDAD"  
-TATI GONZÁLEZ

OUR PARTNERS:

