

Brownfields Job Training Success Story

Brownfields Job Training Grants Create Double Benefits in Puerto Rico

The Challenge

After years of environmental neglect and a string of hurricanes, communities across Puerto Rico were devastated and needed help. When Category 5 Hurricane Irma hit Puerto Rico in September 2017, followed two weeks later by Category 4 Hurricane Maria, severe flooding contaminated residents' drinking water, air, and food supply. This contamination also increased the dangers posed by more than 150 brownfields in the process of redevelopment, such as closed gas stations, shuttered public schools, light industrial sites, empty lots, and abandoned storefronts.

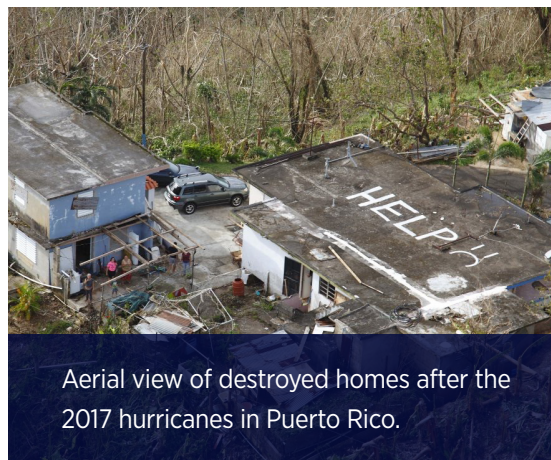
Puerto Rico needed a skilled workforce and funding to begin the rebuilding process, provide residents with access to safe drinking water and food, and protect them from environmental hazards.

The Need

PathStone, a nonprofit organization founded in 1969, has supported low-income families and economically distressed communities in Puerto Rico. In 2007, PathStone began offering employment training services; later, it combined training on the safe removal of pesticides, a common contaminant found in brownfields in Puerto Rico.

Angela Icolano, senior director for program quality and evaluation at PathStone, spent decades applying for external funds. After the 2017 hurricanes, Icolano says, "One of the most horrible pictures I can remember after Hurricane Maria showed people trying to get water, and they were carrying drinking water in old pesticide containers."

Seeing the urgent need for safe contamination cleanup, as well as an opportunity to help unemployed or underpaid residents find immediate, long-term employment, she applied for a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Brownfields Job Training Grant. Her first attempt failed



Aerial view of destroyed homes after the 2017 hurricanes in Puerto Rico.

EPA Brownfields Job Training Grants fund organizations to recruit, train, and place under-employed residents for environmental jobs in their communities.

EPA Grant Recipient:
PathStone

Grants:

- Environmental Workforce Development and Job Training Grants—\$791,310
- Brownfields Job Training Grant—\$500,000

Additional Funding Source:

- Environmental Justice Collaborative Problem-Solving Cooperative Agreement Program—\$500,000



EPA Brownfields Grant funds are not used for redevelopment of sites assessed or cleaned up with Brownfields funds, and projections for future reuse and redevelopment of sites and anticipated benefits are subject to change based on local conditions.



Puerto Rico resident carrying large container of water after the 2017 hurricanes.

“ For too long, communities in Puerto Rico have suffered untold inequities—from challenges with access to clean drinking water to fragile infrastructure that cannot withstand the increase and intensity of storms brought on by climate change. ”

— *Michael S. Regan, EPA Administrator*

because PathStone had designed the training as a series of optional courses offered on a rolling basis. After having a debrief with an EPA project manager on what the strengths and weaknesses of the application were, PathStone redesigned the training structure to provide a required core curriculum to all students. PathStone, then, resubmitted the application, which was selected for funding.

The Response

In September 2015, PathStone received an initial EPA grant of \$192,300, which allowed the organization to provide training in areas such as Hazardous Waste Operations and Emergency Response, Transportation of Hazardous Waste, Pesticide Safety Worker Protection Standard, Asbestos Remediation, and Lead Abatement to 55 participants. In total, PathStone received \$1,291,310 in EPA funds and was able to leverage more than \$100,000. PathStone also secured an additional \$2 million in related funding to increase Puerto Rico’s preparedness and resilience for disasters.

Critics of federal aid programs in Puerto Rico have lamented the lack of input local officials have on how money is spent. PathStone takes a grassroots approach. Mileidy Soto Torres, director of training and employment at PathStone, says, “Each one of our nine offices across Puerto Rico counts on a local community volunteer group to tell them what is going on, but also to help make our programs fulfill their needs.”

When researching how its communities could benefit most from the EPA Brownfields Job Training Grant, PathStone found that low-wage workers who cleaned up toxic chemicals were often unaware of the dangers that lurked in their daily work on brownfield sites. To make matters worse, most of these workers were in dire need of money for even basic needs, such as food and housing. “They’re not earning enough to pay rent, but we get them certified to safely clean up sites and earn more than minimum wage,” says Soto Torres.

An initial step in ensuring the program’s success was making it easier for these workers to attend the program. According to Soto Torres, many lived in rural areas and did not have funds for transportation and food. “So, we sought other resources to make this program work. That means working with a municipality to provide free public transport or finding volunteers to drive people to the training.” Some program participants didn’t have money for lunch. “We found an organization that is willing to donate food or buy them pizza,” she says. “We even have laundromats who provide clothing.”

Another step was teaching the students to gain the skills and confidence needed to safely handle contaminated, polluted, or hazardous brownfields. Markus Gonzalez, PathStone trainer and regional administrator, runs hands-on simulations during which trainees learn how to handle exposure to chemicals

For more information:

Visit the EPA Brownfields website at www.epa.gov/brownfields or contact the Region 2 office at 212-637-3283 or mitchell.schenine@epa.gov.

To see other Brownfields Job Training programs across the United States and its territories, see EPA’s Brownfields Job Training Current and Past Grantees map at www.epa.gov/brownfields/brownfields-job-training-grants-technical-assistance-resources#Grantees_Map.



Mileidy Soto Torres
Director of Training and Employment, PathStone



Markus Gonzalez
Trainer and Regional Administrator, PathStone



Naysabeth Vargas
Placement Developer, Career Service, PathStone

on toxic sites. Many of his students lack confidence to learn formally. Some are in their 20s or 30s, finishing high school degrees; others have criminal records and are chronically unemployed. “I have years of working with diverse students; I just blend in with them.”

During a class session, Gonzalez prepared a learning exercise. He told students that a 5,000-gallon tank with a strong and dangerous chemical had exploded and they had to go in as a team and decontaminate the site. “The students are scared. So, I go step by step. I tell them I’ve been where they are, without much knowledge. I am no chemistry teacher.” While teaching the students, he encourages them to problem solve on their own, rather than just telling them the answers, to build their self-esteem.

Gonzalez says, “Ninety-nine percent of the training participants are afraid the first day and are thinking of not coming back the next day. And 99 percent end up loving it, feel empowered, and finish the training.”

Naysabeth Vargas Mejías, 29, a university-trained agronomist and an EPA Brownfields Job Training Grant participant, joined the program because she thought the training would help her career advancement, particularly with occupational safety and health, as well as teach her to work safely with pesticides.

Seeing her classmates’ perseverance in the face of food and housing shortages inspired her to spread the word about the program throughout Puerto Rico. She now works as a placement and career services developer for PathStone’s Community Development Block Grant program. “I help participants have a better quality of life,” says Vargas Mejías, her eyes shining with enthusiasm.

Vargas Mejías says PathStone’s training also empowered her to take a more active role in protecting an environment affected by so many natural disasters. “We can’t wait for others to show up and make sure we survive. We have to do it ourselves.”

The Results

Soto Torres believes programs like PathStone fulfill a desperate need in the U.S. territory, which has a high portion of minimum-wage workers. Families cry tears of gratitude during the brownfields job training graduation ceremonies in Puerto Rico. “Parents get up and say how thankful they are that the program exists,” Soto Torres says. “Our success is every graduate who gets a better job. Thanks to the EPA Brownfields Job Training Program, we have seen many individuals move from a minimum wage of \$8.50 to high-paying jobs. A recent graduate went from earning \$8 an hour to \$19 an hour as a plant manager.” Another training graduate now works in planification for a municipality, earning \$21 an hour, according to Soto Torres.

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Students participating in a HAZWOPER PathStone job training learning exercise.



PathStone program participant on the job in Puerto Rico.

For aspiring grantees looking for tips to secure EPA Brownfields Grants, Icolano offers some advice. “You need to go talk to mayors and hold 6 to 12 town meetings to assess community needs before you even apply for the grant.”

She adds that grant applicants should do their science homework and match community needs with the appropriate job training. “You should find out about brownfields and pollution in your communities: What inactive industrial sites are in the area? What kind of chemicals might have been spilled there? Which ones are air contaminants, which are water contaminants, and which are soil contaminants?”

Connecting with employers to learn what qualifications—training and certifications—they require prospective employees to have is also vital. “If you have sites where asbestos was officially identified as a problem, then you know training people to become certified to remove asbestos is likely going to provide them with employment,” Icolano notes.

In the end, Soto Torres says, “We’ve made a big impact on our training participants’ lives, which also brings something positive for their families and their communities.”

“Despite economic and educational barriers, my peers had the courage to do what seemed to them like impossible tasks to better their lives.”

— Naysabeth Vargas Mejías, Placement and Career Service Developer, PathStone

2014



PathStone submits first EPA Job Training Grant application but is unsuccessful

2015



\$192,300

PathStone revises application, resubmits, and receives first EPA award

2017



\$199,010

PathStone receives second EPA award; later that year, hurricanes Irma and Maria strike Puerto Rico

2020



\$200,000

PathStone receives third EPA award

2022



\$200,000

PathStone receives fourth EPA award

2023



\$500,000

PathStone receives fifth EPA award

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