



## **Update: Trauma Recovery, EMDR Humanitarian Assistance Programs in Puerto Rico**

In 2018, Trauma Recovery, EMDR Humanitarian Assistance Programs responded to rising suicides and related trauma suffering in Puerto Rico (PR) following Hurricane Maria with EMDR Basic I and II trainings. Working with Vanessa Cintrón, M.A., the Puerto Rican Coalition in Minnesota, and the Association of Social Workers, the first trainings were held in June and August 2018, at the Interamerican University in San Juan, with 44 participants

including counselors, social workers and psychologists. A second Basic I and II training was conducted in July and October of this year, in Mayaguez, western Puerto Rico. Neriluz Maldonado Pérez, Ph.D, now an EMDRIA approved consultant and facilitator in training, who retrained in EMDR with Trauma Recovery in the 2018 sessions, and Vanessa Cintrón, M.A. provide an update of the amazing impact Trauma Recovery's substantial investment and efforts to deliver local EMDR training has had on Puerto Rico's mental health.

## **Treatment Outcomes, Innovation and New Research Partnership**

The EMDR training was the impetus that extended trauma treatment to Puerto Rico's population hard hit by Maria, and addressed important at-risk subpopulations. The trainings have produced an innovative program focused on students and victims of violence as well as a research partnership between Dr. Maldonado Pérez's practice, Therapy & Family Counseling, and Albizu University, Mayaguez, to research the EMDR model and mental health on the island.

Since the initial 2018 EMDR training, over 1000 Puerto Ricans have received "pro bono" EMDR therapy from Trauma Recovery trained volunteers. Working with Trauma Recovery volunteers, Dr. Maldonado Pérez has also created and implemented specific treatment programs for suicide prevention, sexual abuse and gender violence. The work began with 14 students at Ruth Evelyn Cruz Santos High School in Cido, affected by trauma. Some in the group had been hospitalized after suicide attempts and all struggled with grades, behavior and parental relationships. Dr. Maldonado Pérez created "*E-motions, Interactive Protocol in Motion with EMDR*" to address these issues. Sixteen mental health professionals who had trained with Trauma Recovery's Basic I and II EMDR sessions and treated students with the new program. The outcomes were rapid and dramatic. A school social worker reported that three suicidal teens had been saved through treatment and all the





students experienced improved mood, better grades, better parental relationships and a newfound confidence with oral presentations and participation. The Puerto Rico Suicide Prevention Commission approved the program. The Puerto Rican Senate bestowed special recognition for the program's excellent results, and special commendations to team members, for service offered to the students and their parents.

Results continue to build from the student-focused program, with the Puerto Rican Department of Education endorsing and incorporating it into an *Emotion Management Club* introduced to all public schools. On October 25, 2019, three thousand six hundred high school students were initiated into the Young Saving Lives program. Government agencies collaborating on suicide prevention embraced Neriluz Maldonado Pérez's protocol, incorporating learnings for the Trauma Recovery EMDR trainings, and now work directly with school staff, students and their families to make suicide intervention available to all high school students on the island.

The "*E-motions, Interactive Protocol in Motion with EMDR*" model was also used to treat 20 women victims of abuse or crime in the municipalities of Catanõ and Bayamoñ. A work group of nine clinicians, trained in the Trauma Recovery EMDR session of 2018 treated this group over a six-month period. Dr. Maldonado Pérez says the women express renewed joy in life, thanks to their treatment. The initiative is now being evaluated to offer life tools and coaching.

### **Vision and Next Steps**

Trauma Recovery and local PR clinicians share the goal of increasing the number of EMDR mental health professionals across Puerto Rico, the archipelago and outlying islands. Maldonado Pérez, with other local clinicians are leading efforts to bring additional trainings and prepare teachers and psychology students in universities, so that together they can improve the mental health of their local communities. She praises the peer collaboration feature of Trauma Recovery's training, saying, "the Trauma Recovery EMDR training is an incredible experience and opportunity to discuss cases with peers and share ideas and feedback."



## **Thanks and Gratitude**

Dr. Maldonado Perez said, "I am extremely happy and grateful for the participation of Trauma Recovery in Puerto Rico, for their significant investment and the efforts of each of the facilitators, coaches, and trainers who were instrumental in the progress in PR." Trauma Recovery, EMDR Humanitarian Assistance Programs, Executive Director Carol Martin and the Puerto Rican clinician team who trained with Trauma Recovery in 2018 and 2019 extend a special thanks to the Puerto Rican Coalition in Minnesota, especially their liaison, Mrs. Vanessa Cintrón, M.A., her leadership, great dedication to her work and Puerto Rico and many contributions.