

# The Star-Ledger

**'This is family to us.' N.J. state troopers deploy to Puerto Rico.**

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NJ Advance Media for NJ.com and The Star-Ledger

Published Jan. 25, 2020

New Jersey troopers left for Puerto Rico Saturday, just hours after another earthquake hit the island.

"Puerto Rico needs us and it needs you," Gov. Phil Murphy told more than 30 troopers gathered at a Newark police station, shortly before they drove to the airport.

"These are Americans who are in desperate need of help," he said. "This is family to us."

Since late December, large quakes have knocked out power, destroyed hundreds of homes and killed at least one person, according to The Associated Press. Murphy announced Tuesday that troopers would spend about two weeks helping protect thousands of displaced residents in the Ponce region. Seven troopers flew to San Juan Wednesday to prepare, and a total of 50 will eventually deploy.

Murphy was joined by more than a dozen other state officials and lawmakers, including State Sen. Teresa Ruiz, D-Essex.

Ruiz teared up when she spoke about relatives on the island.

"It's emotional for many of us," she said, "to call a family member, to hear the screams in the beginning."

"You're going to bring a sense of peace, which is the most critical thing that is needed right now," she told the troopers.

Officers began loading duffel bags onto an NJ Transit bus a little after 4 p.m. One trooper tucked United Airlines paperwork into his hat. Another fist-bumped an officer sitting in parked car.

Col. Patrick Callahan, acting superintendent of the State Police, gathered everyone around him after the luggage was loaded. He listed off states that troopers had assisted over the years.

"We're helping a lot of people who don't have anything to do with New Jersey," he said while planes roared overhead. "That's the special part of being in this outfit."

The troopers will arrive at their final destination early Sunday morning, a spokesperson said. They'll be sworn in on the island and work with full police powers.

Trooper Jeffrey Lebron, 33, is from Puerto Rico and jumped at the chance to deploy. Family members were safe, he said, and they were glad to hear he was on his way.

“They were very proud of me,” he said.

Puerto Ricans have been U.S. citizens for more than a century, and a mutual aid agreement called the Emergency Management Assistant Compact allows states and territories to share resources after disasters. Callahan said New Jersey was the first to respond to a call for help.

The trip will cost about \$1 million, according to Callahan, although he said the state will be reimbursed by Puerto Rico and the federal government.

A little after 5:30 p.m., two police cars switched on flashing lights and guided the packed bus onto the highway and toward the airport.

Almost 500,000 New Jersey residents have roots in Puerto Rico, according to the U.S. Census. The governor said that was the third-largest population in the continental U.S. when he created a local “Puerto Rico Day” last year. Troopers were also deployed to the island in 2017 to help with hurricane recovery.

Union City, a dog shelter in Madison and the Jersey City Council are also helping with recovery efforts.