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N.J. troopers help Puerto Ricans face the earthquakes that just keep coming

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Last month, Maj. James Ryan received a call from his boss.

Would he fly 1,600 miles south to help keep the peace in earthquake-ravaged Puerto Rico?

Part of the reason Ryan became a trooper was because of the peace he felt decades ago, when troopers walked into his dad's Millstone liquor store after the place had been robbed.

He started planning the day after the call came in.

Countless earthquakes have hit Puerto Rico since the end of last year. After one major quake last month, tent camps sprang up in the south, filled with the newly homeless and those afraid to sleep inside.

Nuns lost their home when a convent collapsed, said state Assemblywoman Yvonne Lopez, D-Middlesex, who flew down in January. At a school where people slept on classroom floors, she watched a trembling dog lose its fur.

Help first came from inside the island.

Thousands of people from the north, which was less affected, drove down with water, food and bedding, said Thomas Vazquez, a 27-year-old medical student at the southern Ponce Health Sciences University.

His school bumped up the launch date of a mobile medical unit, and Vazquez joined a caravan of students and staff caring for people with skyrocketing blood pressure, empty medication bottles and the stress of not knowing when they would be hit next.

"It's hard to feel safe," said Laura Domenech, the senior medical officer for the university's nonprofit and part of the mobile unit. "People are most concerned about housing."

At first, local cops patrolled the tent camps. But that left them hard-pressed to deal with other calls, like robberies of empty houses, officials said.

This was how the New Jersey State Police could help.

Gov. Phil Murphy ordered more than 50 troopers and staff to Puerto Rico not long after the 6.4 magnitude quake on Jan. 7.

Ryan, the state trooper, had been to Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria. But this was different.

In the Ponce region, close to 2,000 people were spread across ten camps in five towns. Residents were living on a soccer field in Peñuelas, Ryan said, and filled a Yauco baseball stadium's infield and outfield.

Officers decided each camp would get at least four troopers. No one would work alone. About half the group spoke Spanish, but at least one local cop would stick around at each place.

Every day during their two-week shift, troopers left Ponce's Caribe Hotel around 5 a.m. and returned around 5:30 in the evening, Ryan said. There were no days off.

They joined hundreds of soldiers in the same area, said Marimar Rivera-Medina, a staff sergeant with the Puerto Rico National Guard. Gang members would occasionally come near the camps, she said, but they didn't enter.

"The New Jersey guys are huge," Rivera-Medina said. "They scare people off."

While some residents had to be kicked out, Ryan said, troopers never made any arrests or used force.

At one camp, troopers noticed that there wasn't enough food in the mornings, Ryan said. The officers collected about \$150 among themselves and grabbed ice, bread and other breakfast ingredients. Other troopers regularly bought coloring books and toys for kids.

"They made me extremely proud," Ryan said.

Ryan's group was replaced by another 57 on Feb. 8. They are scheduled to return Sunday. Officials said New Jersey was the first state to send officers.

Col. Patrick Callahan, acting superintendent of the State Police, previously estimated that the first deployment would cost about \$1 million. An agency spokesperson said the final cost would be reimbursed by Puerto Rico through the Emergency Management Assistance Compact, the agreement that allows states and territories to share resources after disasters. (A spokesperson for the governor didn't immediately say if more troopers would be deployed.)

And the earthquakes keep coming. Ryan was awoken twice in one night. People are still sleeping in front of their homes, residents said, and experts predict that aftershocks will continue for years.

“As a Puerto Rican, I am definitely not used to this,” said Rivera-Medina, with the National Guard. Hurricanes end, she said. The quakes haven’t.

“Knowing that you guys care, and you flew down here to help us out, that I’m not the only one answering the call — it’s moving,” she said.