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Puerto Rico Research Hub prepares to meet with Congress

Luis Perez

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The Barbara Ying Center is the home of UCF's Puerto Rico Research Hub, a research center dedicated to looking out for the well-being of Puerto Ricans in both Florida and the home island.

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The Puerto Rico Research Hub at UCF, led by Dr. Fernando Rivera, has started its preliminary meetings with local legislators in order to visit Congress to present its recent results.

Dr. Sara Belligoni, postdoctoral scholar in security studies at The Puerto Rico Research Hub, said the hub started as a relief center in 2018 after Hurricane Maria and has grown into a research center that pushes forward the well-being of Puerto Ricans in not only Florida but the home island as well.

Belligoni said she has seen the improvement and the expansion of the hub over the years and explained its accomplishments. She said that massive migration occurred after the hurricane, which also saw a great number of students transferring to UCF.

“The reason why that happened is because UCF offered in-state tuition to Puerto Rican students,” Belligoni said. “The hub started as a relief and evolved since then.”

Belligoni said the hub has grown in many aspects, ranging from the events it programs, the number of students working for the program and the establishment of research groups.

“We have been doing research on a variety of topics, spanning from disaster science, emergency management, public health,” Belligoni said. “I learned the most about the motivations of Puerto Ricans to leave the island and settle in Florida.”

According to the hub's website, the four pillars of the hub are academic research, student engagement, partnerships and outreach. Belligoni said the team holds these pillars to a high standard in order to create a united community at UCF and all across Florida.

Each semester, the hub launches a survey out to Puerto Ricans through which students rank their situations in a variety of topics that could range from education to economy, health and more, Belligoni said. The hub team will then go out and set up research groups to meet people, set up events and dig deeper into the issues shown on its website.

Belligoni said that the three major areas where Puerto Ricans showed a high importance and struggle were education, economy and cost of living. She said the financial situation is something to keep an eye on since it has been a trend that many Puerto Ricans are moving into more rural areas in order to afford a sustainable lifestyle.

The hub also connects with local nonprofit organizations in order to inform them of the struggles of Puerto Ricans and offer the services needed, according to its website.

“They are the ones providing the direct service,” Belligoni said. “We do a lot of outreach and community engagement so that whatever we find in our research can lead to real-world actions.”

Rivera, founder and director of the hub, said it is important to get the research out in order to push the agenda forward and make sure work is being done in the areas that are needed. He added that one way to do this is by meeting with local legislators and moving up into Congress and talking to the committees.

Rivera said he takes care of handling the visits to Congress and the process leading up to the visit.

During the summer, the hub had its first visit to Congress, and now that the elections have ended, the group is preparing for its second visit, Rivera said.

Rivera said that the team first has to meet with its local legislators and representatives to talk about its research and have them on board. He said it is important to go into Congress with some backing and funding from local legislators.

“Anybody can go into Congress and talk to congressmen from each state and have a chat,” Rivera said. “Of course, after Jan. 6, the limitations have increased, and it is more formal and professional to go into Congress with backing from your state.”

Rivera said that it is important for the hub to present its findings during an election year, since the new government will be setting its agendas, and it is a good time for the hub to make sure its findings make it onto the agenda for the term of the government.

Rivera said that in politics, everybody promises great things in order to gain voters and set themselves up for the best opportunity to be elected. He also explained that it is up to groups like the hub to make sure politicians uphold those promises and policies and prove their words with actions.

As seen in news outlets like the Associated Press and the hub's survey results, Puerto Rico has of late been dealing with issues in regard to the general well-being, with prolonged periods with no electricity, a shortage of water and more.

Belligoni said the hub has put a lot of focus into what is happening on the island during its research this semester and wants to put a big focus in its meetings on the status of the island.

Rivera said the hub is working closely with affiliates in other states to push its agenda forward, and a big focus that the hub wants to target in the future is expanding its research into other nations and helping Caribbean neighbors.

“We want to help other countries along the Caribbean that could also need a group that supports them,” Rivera said. “We have seen what we have done for Puerto Ricans and we want to expand to help others.”

Belligoni said that with more students interning and working full time at the hub, its influence will continue to grow and the work and influence it has in the community will continue to be more meaningful.