

10/8/19

P1
D.H.G.

HCC to host summit on region's Puerto Rican diaspora

By **DUSTY CHRISTENSEN**
Staff Writer

HOLYOKE — After Hurricane Maria wreaked havoc on Puerto Rico two years ago, some 2,200 displaced families resettled in the city Holyoke.

Prior to that, the economic crisis on the island was already causing many Puerto Ricans to move to the U.S. mainland. The U.S. territory is also dealing with the aftermath of a political scandal and subsequent protest movement that led to the resignation of its governor, and the federal government is withholding essential recovery funds and other money from the island.

It is in that context that Puerto Ricans from across the New England diaspora are meeting in Holyoke together with experts from the region and the island to analyze how the arrival of Hurricane Maria evacuees has impacted the region.

The "Puerto Rico, Puerto Ricans New England Diaspora Summit" will be held all day beginning at 8:30 a.m. on Saturday, Oct. 12, at Holyoke Community College's Leslie Phillips Theater. The gathering is meant to explore the opportunities — but also the challenges — that the growth of the local



GAZETTE FILE PHOTO

A man waves a Puerto Rican flag June 22, 2017, during a Holyoke neighborhood celebration in honor of Oscar Lopez Rivera.

Puerto Rican community brings.

The event is being hosted by Enlace de Familias, as well as Hunter College's Center for Puerto Rican Studies. Betty Medina Lichtenstein, the executive

SEE PUERTO RICAN A7

Puerto Rican diaspora

FROM A1

director of Enlace de Familias, said that the summit will begin by exploring the past, present and future of Puerto Rico's political and economic situation.

"How does that impact the mainland?" she asked. "How does it impact the New England states where many have come to resettle? And if things don't get better on the island, how many more are going to come?"

Medina said that the region needs to ask hard questions about whether it is ready to assist those who might move

from the island to New England in the coming years.

"I don't think that we are," Medina said. She gave the example of Puerto Rican young people who have not been to school for several years because their schools on the island were some of the many that have closed in recent years. "So when they come here, what are we supposed to do?"

Medina said that mental health specialists are coming to talk about topics like the increased suicide rate of women on the island. And participants will also discuss how other states have better supported

Puerto Rican families that did not intend to stay on the mainland prepare to move back home.

The summit will feature a wide range of policymakers, intellectuals, community leaders and others exploring topics like "Puerto Rico solidarity and engagement," "economy, planning and social entrepreneurship," and "models for local engagement and empowerment."

The event is free and open to the public, and it runs from 8:30 a.m. until 6:30 p.m.

Dusty Christensen can be reached at dchristensen@gazettenet.com.