

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

September 27, 2017

The President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

We write to express deep concern about the dire humanitarian situation in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. In Puerto Rico, Hurricane Maria recently knocked out the entire island's electric grid leaving at least 3.4 million Americans with no power, decimated countless structures, and claimed the lives of at least 16 individuals. Hospitals have no running water or basic supplies, and 95% of cellphone structures are still inactive. As a result, we still do not have an accurate assessment of the destruction. In the words of Governor Ricardo Rosselló, the people of Puerto Rico have been "essentially devastated." The U.S. Virgin Islands has also suffered catastrophic damage. While they slowly begin their recovery, more help is needed.

At a time when there is not a second to lose and the health and well-being of millions of Americans in the U.S. territories depend on swift action, we have identified several areas where strong and decisive leadership is needed.

1. We understand an Individual Assistance Disaster Declaration has not been issued for 24 of the municipalities in Puerto Rico.¹ Unfortunately, in the absence of a full declaration for all municipalities, an individual who has lost their home cannot receive housing assistance from FEMA. For example, we understand that on September 25, 2017, the National Weather Service warned of flash floods in the two municipalities downriver from the damaged Guajataca Dam, which is at risk of a catastrophic breach.² Yet those two municipalities, Quebradillas and Isabela, are currently ineligible for Individual Assistance Disaster Funding though they have already suffered much destruction and damage. We formally request that you work with the municipalities to ensure a full disaster declaration for the entire island. We also urge you to send additional first responders, particularly to assist with immediate needs in the most rural areas of Puerto Rico.

2. It is critical that there be a single point of contact in the White House to coordinate the multi-faceted effort across all relevant federal agencies and departments. We call on you to

¹https://gis.fema.gov/maps/dec_4339.pdf

²http://forecast.weather.gov/showsigwx.php?warnzone=PRZ008&warncounty=PRC115&firewxzone=PRZ016&local_place1=San%20Antonio%20PR&product1=Flash+Flood+Warning&lat=18.4536&lon=-66.95#.Wcpwok2ou71

appoint a Special Assistant for Rebuilding to the President to coordinate these efforts and to ensure that Puerto Rico receives every dollar of federal funding it deserves. Similar in concept to the 1998 Federal Interagency Task Force established to coordinate Hurricane Georges response and recovery, as well as the Hurricane Sandy Rebuilding Task Forces of 2012 and 2013, the Special Assistant for Rebuilding can increase coordination among all entities to ensure an expeditious rebuilding.

3. The so-called “Medicaid Cliff” is the date after which Puerto Rico’s supplemental Medicaid funding will be depleted. After Puerto Rico spends down the supplemental funding, its Medicaid allotment will revert to \$357.8 million, significantly lower than is needed and lower than states receive. Puerto Rico will have to pay for the remaining amount out of its own pocket, which will be virtually impossible given the stressed state of the government’s finances not even taking into account the effect of Hurricane Maria. As a result, we call for the inclusion of funding and necessary emergency support for the Puerto Rico Medicaid program in any emergency request your administration submits to Congress.

4. As we note above, approximately 3.4 million U.S. citizens are without power. Basic energy infrastructure is necessary for health services critical for the survival of many, including refrigerating insulin, powering dialysis and nebulizer machines, and providing air conditioning for those sensitive to increased temperatures. In the longer term, a reliable electric grid is the backbone of an economic recovery vital to the island’s success. All appropriate resources must be allocated to quickly restore power to Puerto Rico in collaboration with the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority (PREPA) in a way that is respected by PREPA’s creditors. These resources should include the Department of Energy’s (DOE) internal expertise and manpower, as well as those from the power marketing administrations within DOE. We also call on you to appeal directly to utilities within the U.S. to assist the mutual aid coordinating group of DOE, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and FEMA in expediting damage assessments of utility infrastructure. At least 500 utility employees and experts are needed in the short term to assist with immediate grid restoration, as well as 100 fuel distribution trucks. Additionally, we call on you to send at least 200 10kw generators as soon as possible to enable school buildings and office buildings to function effectively.

5. The Department of Defense (DOD) is uniquely qualified to meet some of Puerto Rico’s critical recovery needs. Construction battalions can repair power and surface transportation infrastructure, command and control aircraft can provide air traffic control and relay communications, strategic airlift platforms can bring supplies to the island, and helicopters can distribute those goods while performing on-call search and rescue. While we understand that DOD is moving to a land-based support phase, we note that the Navy’s hospital ships have been used successfully in previous natural disaster responses and could be again in Puerto Rico. We were pleased to learn yesterday that the USNS Comfort is preparing to depart for Puerto Rico in the coming days, and we urge you to ensure it arrives as expeditiously as possible. Additionally, Governor Rosselló has requested the added presence of 1,500 service members to provide

disaster relief and humanitarian assistance. We call on your administration to send these and any other DOD assets requested by the Puerto Rico Dual Status Commander immediately.

6. Given the breadth of damage in Puerto Rico, as well as the heavy burdens already limiting the Puerto Rican government's finances, we call on you to work with Congress to set the federal cost share at 100 percent for all categories of Public Assistance, including permanent repairs.

7. Given that the vast majority of the island still has no access to any means of communications, we urge you to prioritize restoring communications devices as quickly as possible. We call on your administration to provide resources from any and every agency and department that can assist, including from the Department of Commerce, the Federal Communications Commission, FEMA, DHS, Coast Guard, and DOD.

8. Finally, we call on you to ensure that FEMA, the Coast Guard, and DOD are working as quickly and as effectively as possible to ensure that Roosevelt Roads Naval Station, as well as other port infrastructure, are operational.

We want the people of Puerto Rico to know that we will be with them at every step along this long road, ensuring their survival and robust recovery. It is the least we can do.

Sincerely,

Maria Cantwell
United States Senator

Bill Nelson
United States Senator

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United States Senator

Edward J. Markey
United States Senator

Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator

Kirsten Gillibrand
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United States Senator



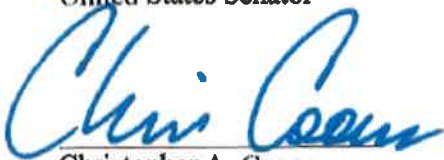
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United States Senator



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Tammy Duckworth
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Patty Murray
United States Senator


Debbie Stabenow
United States Senator



Benjamin L. Cardin
United States Senator

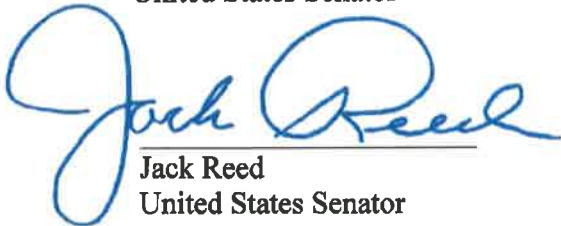

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