

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

September 22, 2017

The Honorable Donald J. Trump
President of the United States
The White House
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Trump:

We write to urge you to immediately establish by executive order a task force to provide the necessary coordination to support the reconstruction of Puerto Rico, Texas, Florida, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and other affected locations—similar to the one created after Hurricane Sandy. As a New York resident, you are probably aware that a Hurricane Sandy Task Force was formed in the wake of that traumatic event, and that the comprehensive plan developed by federal, state, and local stakeholders helped aid the recovery effort in New York City and elsewhere. A similar plan is needed for all of the areas affected during this hurricane season.

For those of us with ties to Puerto Rico, it has been difficult to watch how Hurricane Maria has devastated the island and brought great hardship to the 3.4 million American citizens residing there. High winds and a storm surge have caused widespread flooding, displacement of persons, and significant damage to private homes and businesses as well as public infrastructure. The entire island is currently without electricity and cellular phone and internet services are inoperative in many parts of the island. Furthermore, the government of Puerto Rico has stated that it will take months to fully restore the electricity system. While we still do not know the estimates of total damage, it will be very likely be in the tens of billions of dollars.

We appreciate that you declared that a major disaster exists in Puerto Rico and ordered federal assistance to supplement state and local recovery efforts, and that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is leading the recovery efforts to assist the island. Due to the magnitude of destruction brought by Hurricane Maria, we believe that a long-term comprehensive and collaborative framework is necessary in order to rebuild Puerto Rico, its economy, its health care system and its infrastructure. Reconstruction efforts should address economic conditions and the island's aged infrastructure, which includes public housing, roads, public transportation systems, and utilities. In addition, these efforts should develop a plan to make infrastructure resilient to withstand future natural disasters.

For more than a decade, Puerto Rico has suffered from an economic depression, a financial crisis, unsustainable debt levels, high unemployment, excessive electricity and water utility rates, an exodus of hundreds of thousands of Puerto Ricans to the 50 states, and a chronic lack of job opportunities for young, hardworking people. We believe that the federal government should implement economic policies and reforms such as the ones recommended by the Congressional Task Force on Economic Growth in Puerto Rico.

We also believe that sufficient long-term assistance should be granted to address the healthcare crisis in the island. At a time when hundreds of doctors are leaving Puerto Rico each year, the quality and availability of health care has markedly decreased. These problems are likely to be exacerbated by Hurricane Maria. An important part of the solution will require lifting the Medicaid cap on Puerto Rico and the other territories and granting them state-like treatment for Medicaid and Medicare programs. In addition to this long-term assistance, it is crucial for the federal government to provide swift assistance to prevent the spread of disease on the island in the aftermath of flooding. The federal

government must do everything in its power to prevent mosquito-borne diseases such as Zika, chikungunya, and dengue from spreading and this will require the prevention of mosquito reproduction and the disposal of standing waters.

Additionally, it is imperative that the U.S. Department of Energy, along with FEMA, provide the island with the necessary help to reestablish electrical service in short order. Residents, hospitals, schools, and businesses depend on it. In addition, it is necessary for the administration to provide long-term technical and programmatic assistance so that the island can modernize its electrical grid and power generation and transmission systems. With electricity rates being double to those charged in the mainland, the federal government must address this problem in order to incentivize reconstruction, attract investment, create jobs, and enhance economic growth. The administration must be bold and should consider Puerto Rico as an electricity generation hub for the neighboring islands in the Caribbean such as the U.S. and British Virgin Islands, and thereby create an economy of scale when it comes to power generation and transmission.


Furthermore, the Department of Defense should take bold action in remediating the areas used by the military in Vieques and Culebra, which suffered extreme environmental degradation in their years as Defense Department property. Since the agreement was reached to restore them and return them to a state of environmental health, Puerto Ricans have waited for an expected date when the work will be over. These areas, which contain great amounts of ordnance, were battered by Hurricane Maria and must be cleaned up.

In addition to environmental cleanup, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers should assess the damage sustained across the island and should either complete or initiate projects that accomplish the following: environmental restoration, navigation, flood risk reduction, and hurricane damage reduction. With reports of rivers overflowing in Puerto Rico, it is vital that the Corps assess the situation and take remedial action.

Thank you for your commitment in helping Puerto Rico recover from the worst natural disaster in over 85 years. Creating a Hurricanes Maria, Irma, and Harvey Reconstruction Task Force will be beneficial for all stakeholders in this process. There will be challenges ahead, but we believe that together we can and will help Puerto Rico and other affected areas emerge as stronger than ever before.

We look forward to your response.


Sincerely,



Jose E. Serrano
Member of Congress



Jenniffer González-Colón
Member of Congress



Nydia M. Velázquez
Member of Congress



Darren Soto
Member of Congress