

U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Natural Resources
Washington, DC 20515

May 18, 2020

The Honorable Alex Azar
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue SW
Washington D.C. 20201

Dear Secretary Azar:

We are writing to seek clarity on the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) criteria for prioritizing the distribution of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) resources to U.S. Territories. Since receiving notice that several private sector providers are relying on HHS criterion when allocating test kits, protective equipment, and other lifesaving supplies to jurisdictions in desperate need, it is important to know if HHS is taking Territories' fragile economic and public health infrastructure into consideration when determining the criteria.

For example, Puerto Rico faces unique COVID-19 challenges and vulnerabilities due to an economic crisis, a series of recent natural disasters, and unequal access and treatment under federal programs. The island is still recovering from the brunt of hurricanes Irma and Maria¹ and hundreds of earthquakes suffered this year.² These natural disasters, in addition to economic contraction,³ have weakened Puerto Rico's already poor healthcare system and infrastructure.⁴ Furthermore, the island is at greater risk of negative impacts from COVID-19 due to the age of its population and a range of comorbidities, including: a higher prevalence of hypertension, diabetes, coronary heart disease, obesity, asthma, and incidences of other infectious diseases such as dengue, compared to U.S. averages.⁵

However, as of May 5, 2020, Puerto Rico had only been able to perform 11,237 COVID-19 tests.⁶ One of the primary reasons is that clinical laboratories are struggling to acquire reagents, collection materials and protective equipment that are necessary to increase testing capacity.⁷ This means

¹ NATIONAL OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION, *Hurricane Maria* (AL152017), https://www.nhc.noaa.gov/data/tcr/AL152017_Maria.pdf.

² U.S. GEOLOGICAL SURVEY, *Magnitude 6.4 Earthquake in Puerto Rico*, <https://www.usgs.gov/news/magnitude-64-earthquake-puerto-rico> (last visited May 6, 2020).

³ U.S. GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE, *U.S. Territories Public Debt Outlook – 2019 Update*, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/710/700079.pdf>.

⁴ U.S. HOUSE NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE, *Puerto Rico Earthquakes Report*, <https://naturalresources.house.gov/puerto-rico-earthquakes-report>.

⁵ CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION, *BRFSS Prevalence & Trends Data*, <https://www.cdc.gov/brfss/brfssprevalence/> (last visited May 6, 2020).

⁶ THE COVID TRACKING PROJECT, *Most recent data*, <https://covidtracking.com/data#state-pr> (last visited May 6, 2020).

⁷ EL NUEVO DÍA, *Los laboratorios esperan los reactivos para las pruebas de coronavirus esta semana*, <https://www.elnuevodia.com/noticias/locales/nota/loslaboratoriosesperanlosreactivosparalaspuebasdecoronavirusestasemana-2562684/>.

less than one percent of Puerto Rico's 3.2 million residents⁸ had been tested, which represented four times less the per capita testing of the state with the lowest number of tests conducted.⁹ Limited access to tests has hindered the island's ability to establish a science-based plan to gradually reopen the economy, putting millions of lives at risk.

We urge HHS to consider the vulnerable economic and public health infrastructure in the Territories when determining the criteria for prioritizing the distribution of COVID-19 resources to ensure these jurisdictions receive sufficient test kits, protective equipment and other lifesaving supplies to respond to this pandemic. To assist the Committee's oversight of the COVID-19 response in the Territories, please provide the following information, as soon as possible, but not later than Friday, May 22nd:

1. Lists of declared COVID-19 hot spots or other COVID-19 priority designations since HHS began generating these for use by private sector providers.
2. Detailed criteria used to declare a COVID-19 hot spot or priority jurisdiction.
3. Measures being taken to increase test kit and protective materials, reagents, and supplies distribution to Territories.
4. Whether Territories' vulnerable population and frail economic and healthcare context is being taken into consideration in the HHS priority criteria.

Thank you for the attention to this matter. We look forward to a prompt response.

Sincerely,



RAÚL M. GRIJALVA
Chair
Committee on Natural Resources



GREGORIO KILILI CAMACHO SABLÁN
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⁸ U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, *QuickFacts Puerto Rico*, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/PR> (last visited May 6, 2020).

⁹ THE COVID TRACKING PROJECT, *Most recent data*, <https://covidtracking.com/about-data/visualization-guide> (last visited May 6, 2020).



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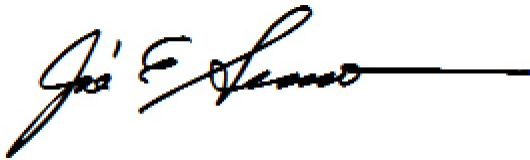
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