

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

May 27, 2020

The Honorable Pete T. Gaynor
Administrator
Federal Emergency Management Agency
500 C Street S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20472

Dear Administrator Gaynor:

We write, ahead of the upcoming hurricane season in the Caribbean, seeking answers to how the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is preparing to respond to a storm that hits Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands amidst the numerous other ongoing disasters and recovery efforts. FEMA must be prepared for the worst, but there is still no public plan to address these compounding disasters.

While we deeply hope that Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands are left untouched this hurricane season, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration announced on May 21 that there is a 60 percent chance the 2020 hurricane season is above average. FEMA must be prepared for the worst. Not only are the islands still rebuilding from the devastating 2017 hurricane season, when Hurricanes Irma and Maria ravaged the islands' people, electrical grid, and infrastructure, Puerto Rico has also been hit by thousands of earthquakes and aftershocks – the most devastating of which was a 6.4-magnitude quake that claimed the life of a 73-year-old man in Ponce. To complicate matters further, the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak has been spreading in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands for months and could further complicate FEMA's response measures. FEMA must have a comprehensive plan in place to address these compounding factors and ensure that our fellow Americans in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands are safe.

Unfortunately, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands are no better prepared to confront another hurricane than they were before Hurricanes Maria and Irma. In fact, they are in a more vulnerable position. The power, water, and healthcare infrastructures on the islands are very fragile. For example, as a result of the January earthquakes, the power generation plant Costa Sur suffered structural damage that has caused a reduction of approximately 20% of available power supply for the whole island of Puerto Rico. Water availability on the islands is also in peril. Critically needed dredging of the Carraizo and La Plata reservoirs has yet to take place. According to Puerto Rico's Aqueduct and Sewer Authority (PRASA), three years after Hurricane Maria, FEMA has not disbursed the 600 million dollars that are needed for the dredging to occur. Without the dredging the water reservoir capabilities are considerably diminished. Lastly, and as a result of the recent disasters, hospitals on the islands have also suffered significant structural damages. Specifically, in Puerto Rico, one hospital in the town of Yauco had to close, and hospitals in the municipality of Ponce have had to shut down entire floors. In the Virgin Islands, hurricane destruction to the roof of the hospital on St. Croix allowed water to infiltrate the facility, severely damaging check-in areas, hospital rooms, and medical

equipment, and forcing the hospital to shut down the entire top floor. The school in Frederiksted sustained severe hurricane damage, including a collapsed roof, which condemned the entire facility. Hurricane force winds completely destroyed many apartments in the largest public housing facility on St. Thomas. These damages remain. Due in part to persistent delays in closing out the Sheltering and Temporary Essential Power (STEP) Program, FEMA still lingers mostly in the emergency work phase of the recovery. In the context of COVID-19, as with other jurisdictions across the country, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands have not been able to test their populations adequately. Scientific experts believe that during the coming weeks, Puerto Rico will start facing a shortage of reagents needed for PCR tests. The fragile stage of critical infrastructure on the islands is a recipe for a humanitarian disaster of unimaginable proportions to occur if the islands are hit with another hurricane in the coming months.

Therefore, we have the following questions for you and your staff, please provide us with a response by June 8, 2020:

1. Have FEMA and the Puerto Rico Emergency Management Agency (PREMA) drafted plans that consider the impact of COVID-19 on disaster response operations? What about FEMA and USVI?
 - a. Please describe current plans, if any, for operating Disaster Recovery Centers while respecting social distancing guidelines and coping with potential lack of internet access among disaster assistance applicants.
 - i. What portion of island residents and/or entities eligible for FEMA Public Assistance have internet connectivity sufficient to apply for assistance remotely?
 - ii. What specific actions has FEMA taken to ensure residents of Puerto Rico and the USVI may access disaster assistance while respecting CDC social distancing guidelines?
2. How would you characterize FEMA's capacity to protect against multi-hazard incidents; for example, if a hurricane and earthquakes were to occur in the same time period?
 - a. Does Puerto Rico and the USVI have sufficient staff, supplies, food, water, and medicine in place on the islands to respond to COVID-19 and one or more natural disasters?
 - b. Does Puerto Rico and the USVI have sufficient personal protective equipment (PPE) for multiple or concurrent disasters?
 - c. What steps has FEMA taken to respond to these disasters if the local governments are determined to not have adequate resources available?
3. Are there FEMA plans in place if a hospital with COVID-19 patients has to be evacuated due to one or more natural disasters?
 - a. Has FEMA assessed whether hospitals that have been restored with FEMA support have adequate access to electricity and water?
 - b. What steps has FEMA taken to ensure that these facilities will retain access to utilities?
 - c. What will FEMA do if these facilities lose electricity or water or both?
4. How would FEMA communicate the need to evacuate during a natural disaster to people sheltering-in-place who have no connectivity?
5. What specific actions has FEMA taken to ensure sufficient emergency housing will be available if needed?

- a. In part due to its experience in the islands following Hurricanes Irma and Maria, FEMA has decided not to use the Sheltering and Temporary Essential Power (STEP) Program during future disaster recovery efforts. How does FEMA plan to address emergency sheltering needs in the event of future major disasters in communities that face challenges and circumstances like those in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands after Hurricanes Maria and Irma?
 - b. How much funding is currently pending for the STEP program in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, and what is the status of the Project Worksheets related to the STEP program in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands?
6. Structures under construction as well as disaster-damaged structures may be more vulnerable to hazards and create risk for surrounding individuals and property.
 - a. What number of permanent work projects authorized in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands for Hurricanes Maria and Irma, and for the earthquakes beginning in 2019, are in the following project phases?
 - i. Cost-estimate or project development phase
 - ii. Obligated and under construction
 - iii. Completed
 - b. Has FEMA released guidance explaining how applicants may complete projects that have been damaged by both Hurricane Maria and the 2019 earthquakes? If not, at what time does FEMA plan to release additional guidance?
 - c. Will FEMA extend deadlines for permanent work projects authorized in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands for Hurricanes Maria and Irma, and the 2019-2020 earthquakes, to reflect the disruption to work due to COVID-19?
 - d. Demolition, construction, and debris-clearance work authorized by FEMA Public Assistance may require PPE to be completed safely. Will FEMA supply Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands with additional scarce medical supplies that may be necessary to safely complete hazard response and recovery work?
7. What is the status of hospitals in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands that have been impacted by Hurricanes Maria and Irma and/or the 2019-2020 earthquakes? How many facilities remain non-operational or partially operational due to damage suffered from previous disasters?
 - a. How many general-care hospital beds and ICU beds are currently available in permanent facilities on the islands?
 - b. How many general-care hospital beds and ICU beds were available in permanent facilities before Hurricanes Maria and Irma hit?
 - c. How many general-care hospital beds and ICU beds are needed in permanent facilities at the current moment?
 - d. What steps has FEMA taken to determine hospital needs and respond prior to the next potential major disaster?
 - e. What is FEMA doing to ensure the hospitals on Puerto Rico and USVI are equipped with: generators, PPE, ventilators, medicine, and PCR tests?
8. How is FEMA working with the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority (PREPA) and the Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority (WAPA) to address electric reliability and dispatch of fossil generation during potential disaster emergencies?
 - a. Does FEMA plan to pre-position emergency generators for the hurricane season? If so, is fuel type a consideration for this generating capacity?
 - b. What is FEMA's plan for providing fuel for emergency generators in Puerto Rico? What about in the USVI?

9. What is the timeline for FEMA to disburse to Puerto Rico the funds needed for the dredging of the Carraizo and La Plata Reservoirs?
10. How many warehouses does FEMA have on Puerto Rico in preparation of hurricane season? What about the USVI?
 - a. Are these warehouses fully stocked?
11. What is FEMA's plan to address the food insecurity issues that Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands will be faced with from another natural disaster compounded with the pandemic?
12. What is FEMA doing to ensure that Puerto Rico's municipalities of Vieques and Culebra have adequate access to healthcare? Specifically, what is the plan for the island of Vieques since the island has not had a functioning hospital since Hurricane Maria?
13. What steps is FEMA taking to ensure the maintenance of public health capacity to respond to COVID-19, including conducting surveillance and testing and following up every positive case with contact tracing, quarantine, and isolation?
14. What steps is FEMA taking to ensure Puerto Rico's robust drug and medical supply manufacturing remains available to the continental US in the face of additional natural disasters?

We appreciate your swift attention and consideration of this request and stand ready to work with FEMA to deliver support and resources to the impacted communities.

Sincerely,



Charles E. Schumer
United States Senator



Nydia M. Velázquez
Member of Congress



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator



Kamala D. Harris
United States Senator

/s/ Robert P. Casey, Jr.

Robert P. Casey, Jr.
United States Senator



Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator

/s/ Chris Van Hollen

Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator



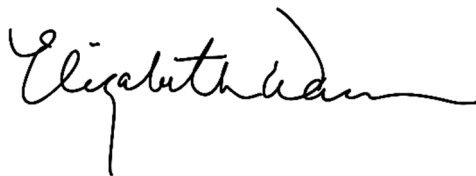
Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator



Robert Menendez
United States Senator

/s/ Tim Kaine

Tim Kaine
United States Senator



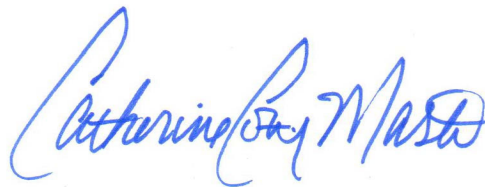
Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



Ron Wyden
United States Senator



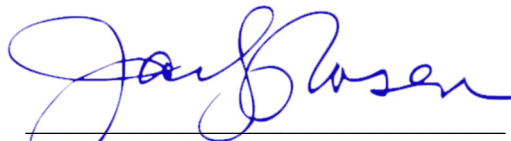
Bernard Sanders
United States Senator



Catherine Cortez Masto
United States Senator



Patty Murray
United States Senator



Jacky Rosen
United States Senator



Stacey E. Plaskett
Member of Congress



Henry C. "Hank" Johnson, Jr.
Member of Congress

Darren Soto
Member of Congress

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez
Member of Congress

Eleanor Holmes Norton
Member of Congress

Albio Sires
Member of Congress

Jesús G. "Chuy" García
Member of Congress

José E. Serrano
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Jared Huffman
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Karen Bass
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Yvette Clarke
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Kathy Castor
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Alcee L. Hastings
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Thomas R. Suozzi
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Gregory Meeks
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Raúl M. Grijalva
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Hakeem Jeffries
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Juan Vargas
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