

WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF JOSÉ CORCINO-ACEVEDO, MAYOR OF VIEQUES, PUERTO RICO, FOR THE HOUSE NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE, CONCERNING H.R. 1317 AND H.R. 1126, BILLS TO PROVIDE STABILITY AND SUSTAINABILITY TO THE AMERICAN CITIZENS ON THE ISLAND OF VIEQUES, PUERTO RICO.

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Thank you, Chairman Grijalva, Ranking Member Westerman, and members of the U.S. House Natural Resources Committee for the opportunity to submit this testimony at the legislative hearing on an issue that unites the people of Puerto Rico beyond partisan and ideological beliefs: peace and justice for the island of Vieques. Our island has suffered due to the unintended consequences of six decades of military target practice which left a legacy of disease and contamination that persist to this day. That is why I look forward to sharing my thoughts on why it is critical for this committee to pass the Vieques Recovery and Development Act (H.R. 1317 / H.R. 1126).

My name is José Corcino-Acevedo. I have had the honor of serving as mayor of Vieques since January 11, 2021 and have lived in Vieques for my entire life. Throughout my professional career, I have focused on public service; serving as a policeman, a fisherman, a local feed store owner, an emergency management official, and now as mayor.

Vieques is an enchanting place. In between sunrise and sunset, the island of Vieques is always beautiful. We have breathtaking beaches, wild Spanish horses that roam the island, and the best bioluminescent bay that lights up with sea life. Our stars twinkle here like no place in the world. Yet, there is an incredible contrast between the beauty of the island and the sickness afflicting its people.

We, the people of Vieques, have the same dreams of other U.S. citizens. But, unlike other fellow citizens elsewhere, we may only dream of having the opportunity to live life without constant worry of our increased risk of developing cancer or strange diseases. We dream of the ability to go to an adequate hospital when we are sick and to know how to protect ourselves from the contamination that affects the lives of everyone we love.

Allow me to tell you the story about how our wonderful people have carried the burden of disease and contamination for decades and how you can help your fellow citizens with a targeted approach to a very unique humanitarian crisis.

In anticipation of entering World War II, the United States Government bought 75 percent of the island to prepare for war. Since then, we have been the location where the American military

trained to defend this great country in every conflict since WWII. Let us remember that many of the toxic substances that were used in Vietnam were tested in Vieques first. Until the military's use of the island ended in 2003, this island served as the training grounds for the bombs, chemicals, and weapons used in these wars. While I am proud that we have served every Americans' security, the unavoidable reality is that every heavy metal and chemical in those 80 million tons of ordinance is now in our environment, and in the food we eat, and now in us. Our country has tested a lot of experimental weapons here. Some of these you have heard of like Agent Orange, napalm, and depleted uranium. Yet, there are also many others that you have never heard of and the records are incomplete. Actually, we still need research to find out what else was used and how it is still making us sick.

Personally, in my life, there are too many people to count that have died from cancer. In every family on Vieques that I know, I know someone who has cancer or who has died from illnesses that are caused by heavy metals. The ones that sit on the forefront of my mind include: my uncles, a faithful 23-year-old mother of 3, my friends Ramón Sierra and Fransisco "Paché" Pimentel, and my employee Sandra. Francisco required dialysis for his treatment. He was unable to get treatment on the island so he labored to get his treatment on the main island of Puerto Rico. Prior to having his dialysis done, Fransisco boarded the ferry to the main island between 4:30am and 5:30am. At arrival, he hired a cab to drive him an hour to San Juan for his appointment at 11am. After treatment, he had to do the same exact thing to get back. Eventually, due to an inability to obtain treatment, he moved to the United States. Some are not as fortunate. Some have to travel the day before and pay for a hotel in San Juan. Some are even less fortunate. Many of our citizens with cancer must pay a lot of money to receive chemo treatment in San Juan. They tell me the nausea they experience on the return is debilitating. There are thousands of Fransiscos on the island that are unable to obtain adequate health care. Within the last year, my friend, Jorge Nieves, died because he could not get to a hospital and so did several children. The hospital that was on the island before hurricane Maria was helpful but was inadequate for dialysis and chemo.

It is difficult to live in Vieques and be sick. Our people live in fear of getting sick or having a minor illness because there is no hospital. I am glad that money has been given by the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) to start a hospital but that only rebuilds the facility and restores the inadequate health care we had before Maria. FEMA is helping provide relief for Maria but is not addressing the consequences or potential for recovery from the contamination. That facility was just a triage facility and residents had to travel to San Juan to get nauseating chemo and return on a ferry that sometimes works and sometimes does not.

We need a facility that treats cancer, heart disease, diabetes, and all the other illnesses caused by the contamination. In addition, we need a hospital that has the research capabilities to understand the unique underlying causes of those illnesses so that we can avoid getting sick in the first place. This bill authorizes the Attorney General, through a special master, to do more than just rebuild

the inadequate structure present before Maria. This will improve the structure to be capable of addressing and treating the diseases caused by the contamination. Help us build a facility that addresses the humanitarian crisis of these American citizens on Vieques, who have the highest rates of cancer, heavy metal illness, cirrhosis and diabetes in the country.

It seems like every year a couple of studies come out that continue to tell us how sick we are. According to the University of Puerto Rico Graduate School of Planning, the island of Vieques has a 269% higher rate of cancer, a 73% higher rate of heart disease, and 58% greater rate of diabetes than Puerto Rico. In addition, the Puerto Rico Bureau of Vital Statistics found that deaths on Vieques for liver disease are 95% higher and infant mortality was 55% higher than in Puerto Rico. For those of us who live in Vieques, these are not just numbers, these are mothers and children and fathers. The number of people that have died in one family is devastating but when looking at the entire island, it is horrific.

Many non-residents come to enjoy the beautiful beaches, but many of our youth must leave the island to have access to adequate medical facilities and financial opportunity. From a population of 10,000 a decade ago, only around 9,350 *Viequenses* remain. The three factors causing this decrease in population include: decreasing birth rate, increasing death rate, and lack of financial opportunities and health services. So many of our people have died from cancer, heart disease, cirrhosis, diabetes and many strange and undiagnosed illnesses. Unfortunately, the ones who have promise, like our young people, have left.

We have really hard-working people, but we do not have all of the resources to build and manage a hospital, or to carry out the necessary research. Under this legislation, the special master will help coordinate the federal resources available to help us rebuild. This targeted approach is much better than simply giving us a check since we may still be facing the same problems 10 years from now. What Vieques needs is what this bill would accomplish: compensation, helping do the research, and building and maintaining the hospital.

This is an issue of justice. We are simply asking to be treated like every other American citizen would be in this situation. Each citizen, on Vieques, will receive compensation similar to what western Americans were given when they were diagnosed with cancer from radiation exposure under the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act.

We need to feel like our sacrifices to the country are appreciated and this bill does that. First, this bill provides up to \$110,000 for citizens who have 3 serious illnesses. Secondly, the bill provides the hospital we truly need and gives those who are sick from contamination the ability to use it without cost. Finally, it provides us with the research we need to put an end to this vicious cycle of illness that we continue to have due to the toxins in our environment.

I understand that what happened on Vieques is a unique and unavoidable consequence of making America safe for over 6 decades, but we ask that this great nation gives us the ability to rebuild and restore our American dream. Passing this bill is in the interest of every American. If and when this bill is approved, we will not only be helping my constituents in Vieques but also help to avoid future problems in other parts of the country.

The Vieques Recovery and Development Act is an opportunity to make history by providing a comprehensive solution that gives us what we truly need to rebuild and restore our ability to pursue the American dream. I do not want the next mayor to have to continue to deal with this health crisis that affects every aspect of these citizens' lives. I want our children to learn about this humanitarian crisis in history books not while receiving chemo.

Members of the committee, this concludes my statement. I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.