

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

October 14, 2022

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
President
1600 Pennsylvania Ave N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20230

Dear President Biden,

Puerto Rico has been reeling from the impact of Hurricane Fiona since September 18. The hurricane caused massive floods, compromised the island's energy grid, and left hundreds of thousands without access to potable water. The aftermath of the storm has demonstrated that, five years after Hurricane María, Puerto Rico remains unacceptably vulnerable to natural disasters. Considering this continued vulnerability, we urge you to focus resources on Puerto Rico's long term recovery and ensure interagency coordination similar to what was seen in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, manifested in the creation of the Hurricane Sandy Rebuilding Task Force.

The catastrophic impact of the recent hurricane cannot be separated from the challenges that Puerto Rico has faced in the last five years. Though Congress has allocated \$80 billion for the island's recovery, persistent bottlenecks have complicated the disbursement of federal disaster funding. Many of the delays can be attributed to the Trump Administration's inaction and delay in releasing recovery funding. According to Center for a New Economy, a local think tank, the post-Maria recovery has suffered from a systemic lack of coordination: among federal agencies, between federal agencies and their local counterparts, and between federal and state agencies on one side and municipalities on the other^[1]. The Fiscal Oversight and Management Board's (FOMB) ongoing austerity policies have also hobbled the ability of local governments to respond to crises and prepare for future climate impacts. We appreciate the steps your Administration has taken to remove unnecessary barriers to federal disaster funding since taking office and the President's recent actions to advance the recovery and rebuilding effort. However, we believe additional coordination is necessary to ensure Puerto Rico's swift, equitable, and full recovery.

In this stage of the recovery, federal efforts must focus on addressing coordination challenges and facilitating the effective disbursement of funds rather than creating additional obstacles. To that end, we request the creation of a Recovery Task Force and at minimum the coordination of all relevant federal agencies as well as engagement with a broad coalition of local stakeholders in planning the recovery—including Puerto Rico's central government, municipalities, non-profits, academic, and the private and civic sectors.

The Puerto Rico Recovery Task Force and your Administration's recovery efforts can draw from the successes of the Hurricane Sandy Rebuilding Task Force, established by President Obama via executive order in the wake of Superstorm Sandy.^[2] The Sandy Task Force represented a whole-of-government approach to that recovery process—chaired by then-Secretary of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Shaun Donovan, it included members from 23 different executive branch agencies and White House Offices. The Sandy Task Force produced a series of recommendations, ranging from improving internal federal government procedures to addressing local vulnerabilities to climate shocks, which prioritized mitigation and resilience in the face of future disasters. It also leveraged resources from HUD, the Federal

^[1] See <https://www.elnuevodia.com/corresponsalias/washington-dc/notas/proponen-un-task-force-federal-para-coordinar-la-reconstruccion-de-puerto-rico/>

^[2] See Executive Order 13632, December 7, 2012.

Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and other agencies to offer state and local governments technical guidance and flexibility in the development of disaster recovery plans.

Civil society actors have praised the Sandy Rebuilding Task Force as an effective approach to achieving a resilient recovery. The Brookings Institution's Metropolitan Policy Program celebrated it as an "unprecedented commitment to coordination across federal agencies and collaboration between the federal, state and local governments and key local constituencies." Dr. Judith Rodin, President of the Rockefeller Foundation, commended the Task Force for establishing "a resilience strategy that prioritizes cutting red tape, improved coordination, smart technology and innovative solutions."^[3]

In this spirit, The Puerto Rico Recovery Task Force can meet the Administration's goals by:

- 1) Providing a high-level forum for interagency coordination to ensure the proper sequencing and timely funding of disaster recovery programs;
- 2) Engaging in collaborative planning efforts that take local knowledge and community expertise into account; and
- 3) Leveraging the resources of multiple agencies to provide technical support and build local capacity to meet the challenges inherent in Puerto Rico's recovery.

Crucially, all actions taken by your Administration must operate with a long-term outlook to support Puerto Rico's most vulnerable populations. Hurricane Fiona has shown that natural disasters disproportionately impact rural and poor communities—their needs must be heard, understood, and centered across all initiatives if Puerto Rico is to achieve a just recovery.

After five years of bottlenecks, the Biden Administration must continue to act with urgency to establish the necessary mechanisms for a comprehensive, effective, and forward-looking recovery for Puerto Rico. We believe an increased interagency coordination and oversight are crucial first steps for ensuring a better, more resilient future for the island and we look forward to working together with your Administration.

Sincerely,



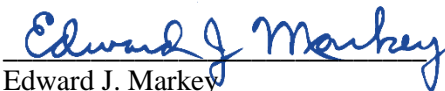
Charles E. Schumer
United States Senator



Nydia M. Velázquez
Member of Congress



Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator

^[3] Statements sourced from HUD Press Release: [Statements of Representatives From Non-Profits, Academic Institutions and Community Groups From Around the Region and the Country on the Hurricane Sandy Rebuilding Strategy](#). August 19, 2013.



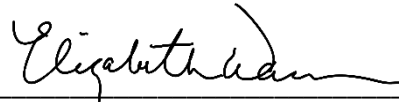
Sherrod Brown
United States Senator



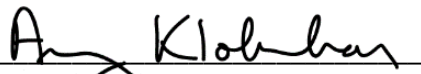
Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator



Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator




Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



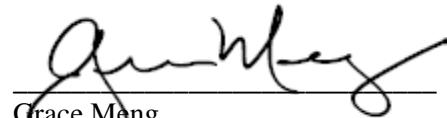
Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator



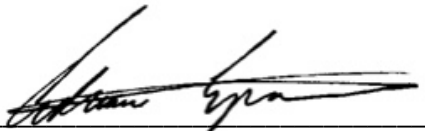
Robert Menendez
United States Senator



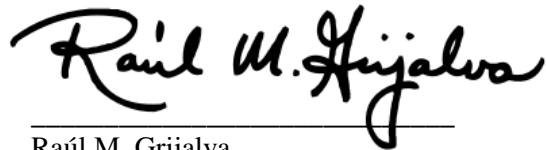
Ted W. Lieu
Member of Congress



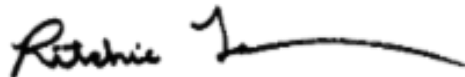
Grace Meng
Member of Congress



Adriano Espaillat
Member of Congress



Raúl M. Grijalva
Member of Congress



Ritchie Torres
Member of Congress



Jamaal Bowman
Member of Congress



Darren E. Soto
Member of Congress

/s

Dwight Evans
Member of Congress