

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

September 25, 2018

Senator Lamar Alexander
Chairman
Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions
428 Senate Dirksen Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Alexander,

We write to again request that the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions (HELP) hold hearings to assess the challenges facing the health and educational systems of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands in the wake of Hurricanes Irma and Maria.

On December 21, 2017, three months after Hurricane Maria, a bipartisan group of nine HELP Committee members wrote you to ask for hearings on these issues.¹ A month later, 186 organizations sent you a letter echoing this request.² But the Committee has not convened a hearing on these issues, and there appear to be no plans for the Committee to do so. The first anniversary of the September hurricanes that upended the lives of millions of U.S. citizens has now passed without the Committee holding a single hearing on any aspect of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands' recovery.

Since we sent our initial request for hearings in December 2017, a number of developments have only underscored the need for the HELP Committee to conduct oversight of pressing issues confronting Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

On August 28, 2018, the Puerto Rico government revised its death toll to 2,975 lives lost from Hurricane Maria and its aftermath.³ For months, the official death toll had been listed as 64 fatalities, despite numerous reports and studies indicating that it was far higher.⁴ The update to

¹ Letter from Senator Elizabeth Warren, Senator Bill Cassidy, et al. to Chairman Lamar Alexander, December 21, 2017, https://www.warren.senate.gov/files/documents/2017_12_21_Letter_to_Alexander_re_Hurricane_Irma.pdf.

² Letter from 186 organizations to Chairman Lamar Alexander and Ranking Member Patty Murray, January 23, 2018, <https://www.puertoricoreport.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/HELP-letterPR-USVI-hearings012318-1.pdf>.

³ CNN, "Puerto Rico's new Hurricane Maria death toll is 46 times higher than the government's previous count," Leyla Santiago, Catherine E. Shoichet, and Jason Kravarik, August 28, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/08/28/health/puerto-rico-gw-report-excess-deaths/index.html>.

⁴ New York Times, "Official Toll in Puerto Rico: 64. Actual Deaths May Be 1,052," Frances Robles, Kenan Davis, Sheri Fink, and Sarah Almukhtar, December 9, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/12/08/us/puerto-rico-hurricane-maria-death-toll.html>; Center for Investigative Journalism and Latino USA, "Nearly 1,000 More People Died in Puerto Rico After Hurricane María," Omayra Sosa Pascual and Julio Ricardo Varela, December 7, 2017, <https://latinousa.org/2017/12/07/nearly-1000-people-died-puerto-rico-hurricane-maria/>; Washington Post, "New Puerto Rico data shows deaths increased by 1,400 after Hurricane Maria," Arelis R. Hernández, June 1, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/new-puerto-rico-data-shows-deaths-increased-by-1400-after-hurricane-maria/2018/06/01/43bb4278-65e2-11e8-99d2-0d678ec08c2f_story.html; New England Journal of Medicine,

the official death toll figures reflect the results of a government-commissioned study by researchers at George Washington University’s Milken Institute School of Public Health,⁵ which found that Hurricane Maria was in fact the deadliest natural disaster in recent U.S. history.⁶

Both Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands continue to face critical challenges in their health and educational systems. U.S. Virgin Islands Governor Kenneth Mapp recently extended the territory’s ongoing state of emergency.⁷ The Virgin Islands’ health care system has still not recovered from Hurricanes Irma and Maria; for example, Schneider Regional Medical Center—the sole hospital on St. Thomas⁸—has not yet been fully repaired and its cancer institute is still inoperative.⁹ About one-third of the U.S. Virgin Islands’ schools weren’t ready to open on time to begin the academic year.¹⁰

The health care system in Puerto Rico also faces substantial challenges. Even before Hurricane Maria, there was an exodus of doctors from the island¹¹—a trend that’s believed to have accelerated.¹² By many accounts, Puerto Rico is in the midst of a mental health crisis because so many residents were traumatized by the catastrophe.¹³ And the island is poised to make major cuts to Medicaid spending, reaching almost \$840 million less per year by 2023.¹⁴

“Mortality in Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria,” Nishant Kishore, et al., May 29, 2018, <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMsa1803972>.

⁵ Milken Institute School of Public Health at George Washington University, “Ascertainment of the Estimated Excess Mortality from Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico,” August 28, 2018, https://publichealth.gwu.edu/sites/default/files/downloads/projects/PRstudy/Acertainment%20of%20the%20Estimated%20Excess%20Mortality%20from%20Hurricane%20Maria%20in%20Puerto%20Rico_0.pdf.

⁶ CBS News, “Hurricane Maria Is Now One of the Deadliest Disasters in U.S. History,” Jason Silverstein, August 28, 2018, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/puerto-rico-hurricane-maria-is-now-one-of-the-deadliest-disasters-in-u-s-history/>.

⁷ The Virgin Islands Consortium, “Governor Mapp Extends State of Emergency beyond One-Year Anniversary of 2017 Storms,” August 31, 2018, <https://viconsortium.com/virgin-islands-2/governor-mapp-extends-state-of-emergency-beyond-one-year-anniversary-of-2017-storms/>.

⁸ NPR Weekend Edition Sunday, “In The U.S. Virgin Islands, Health Care Remains In A Critical State,” Greg Allen, February 4, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/02/04/582256476/in-the-u-s-virgin-islands-health-care-remains-in-a-critical-state/>.

⁹ St. John Source, “Schneider Execs Say Hospital Is Scarred, but Functional,” April Knight, August 3, 2018, <https://stjohnsource.com/2018/08/03/schneider-execs-say-hospital-is-scarred-but-functional/>.

¹⁰ Virgin Islands Consortium, “20 of 33 Public Schools Will Open September 4; More Openings Announced for September 17,” Ernice Gilbert, August 29, 2018, <https://viconsortium.com/education/20-of-33-public-schools-will-open-september-4-more-openings-announced-for-september-17/>.

¹¹ El Nuevo Día, “Shortage of doctors in Puerto Rico causes alarm,” Marga Parés Arroyo, July 23, 2018, <https://www.elnuevodia.com/english/english/nota/shortageofdoctorsinpuertoricocausosalarm-2436979/>.

¹² PBS News Hour and Kaiser Health News, “Sick Puerto Ricans are facing long waits to see the doctor,” Sarah Varney, July 17, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6&v=51tdObCIImR0>.

¹³ Guardian, “Despair and anxiety: Puerto Rico’s ‘living emergency’ as a mental health crisis unfolds,” Amanda Holpuch, August 7, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/07/despair-and-anxiety-puerto-ricos-living-emergency-as-a-mental-health-crisis-unfolds>; Monitor on Psychology, “Mental health in Puerto Rico,” Jeremy Lybarger, May 2018, <http://www.apa.org/monitor/2018/05/puerto-rico.aspx>.

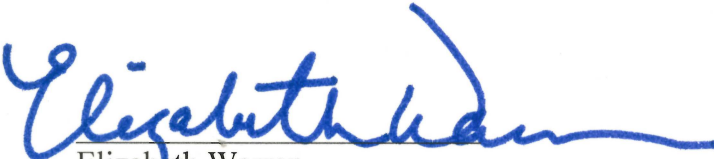
¹⁴ Kaiser Health News, “In Weary Post-Storm Puerto Rico, Medicaid Cutbacks Bode New Ills,” Sarah Varney and Carmen Heredia Rodriguez, August 6, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/in-weary-post-storm-puerto-rico-medicare-cutbacks-bode-new-ills/2018/08/06/86fdedbe-995f-11e8-a8d8-9b4c13286d6b_story.html; Financial Oversight and Management Board for Puerto Rico, “New Fiscal Plan for Puerto Rico,” June 29, 2018, pp. 91–97, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1c9LACF1yzSi1sUEINVaZHklo93TJR55M/view>.

This summer, Puerto Rico closed down more than 250 schools. As the academic year begins, some schools' physical plants are still in poor shape, teachers remain unassigned, and many students have been forced into new schools.¹⁵ Puerto Rico's institutions of higher education were also hit hard by Hurricane Maria,¹⁶ and burdensome bureaucratic hurdles have reportedly made it difficult for colleges and universities to receive disaster aid.¹⁷


These examples represent a small sample of the pressing issues within the jurisdiction of the HELP Committee that are affecting Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. We have a responsibility to exercise our oversight responsibilities to ensure that our fellow U.S. citizens struggling with the aftermath of Hurricanes Irma and Maria—the deadliest natural disaster in recent U.S. history—receive the resources and assistance they need to recover from these disasters and to rebuild in a long-term, sustainable way. We must find out what went wrong in the preparation for and recovery from this disaster, and make sure that federal and state agencies are better prepared for the next natural disaster.

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

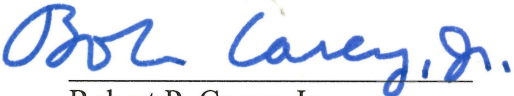
Sincerely,



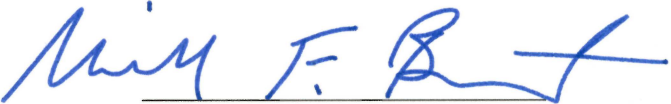
Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



Bernard Sanders
United States Senator



Robert P. Casey, Jr.
United States Senator



Michael F. Bennet
United States Senator

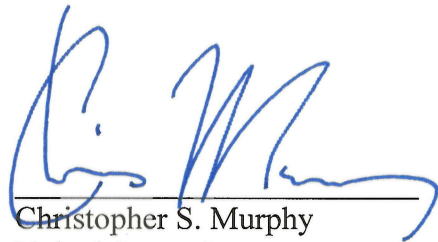
¹⁵ Education Week, "Clash of Visions as New School Year Opens in Storm-Bruised Puerto Rico," Andrew Ujifusa, August 15, 2018, <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2018/08/15/clash-of-visions-as-new-school-year.html>; Miami Herald, "Kids are back in school in Puerto Rico. But Hurricane Maria's effects still linger," Kyra Gurney, August 13, 2018, <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/article216546935.html>.

¹⁶ PRI's The World, "Puerto Rico's public university system is in disarray. But it's not just because of Hurricane Maria," Lisa Bartfai, June 11, 2018, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2018-06-11/puerto-ricos-public-university-system-disarray-its-not-just-because-hurricane>.

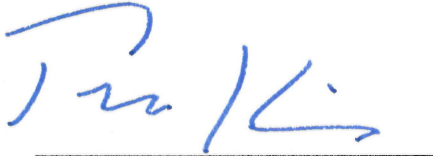
¹⁷ Congressman José E. Serrano, "Serrano, Velazquez, and Gillibrand Urge Education Department to Revise Burdensome Disaster Funding Application Process," press release, April 6, 2018, <https://serrano.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/serrano-velazquez-and-gillibrand-urge-education-department-revise>.



Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator



Christopher S. Murphy
United States Senator



Tim Kaine
United States Senator



Tina Smith
United States Senator