

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

January 13, 2020

President Donald Trump
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

We write in regards to your declaration of a federal emergency in Puerto Rico following several earthquakes, including a 6.4-magnitude quake, which struck the island beginning on Saturday, December 28, 2019.^{1 2} In order to provide as much assistance as possible, as quickly as possible, to the people of Puerto Rico, we urge you to immediately waive Puerto Rico's local cost-sharing requirement by setting the federal cost-share at 100% for Public Assistance aid administered by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

Well before Hurricanes Irma and Maria devastated Puerto Rico and its millions of residents in 2017, Puerto Rico suffered from a debt crisis, with the island already struggling under the weight of more than \$70 billion in debt.^{3 4} The island's debt has complicated disaster response and reconstruction from the 2017 hurricanes, and we remain concerned that a 25% local match required for necessary Public Assistance funding will be a barrier in responding to the urgent needs of Puerto Rico and its residents.

News reports documented the federal government's failure to adequately respond to the 2017 natural disasters.⁵ According to one report "[FEMA] failed to properly prepare for [the 2017] hurricane season and was unable to provide adequate support to hurricane victims in

¹ Washington Post, "Puerto Rico earthquake triggers blackout, reports of injuries and at least one dead," Cristina Corujo, Arelis Hernández, and Samantha Schmidt, January 7, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/puerto-rico-earthquake/2020/01/07/0cbe4c92-3143-11ea-9313-6c8a89b1b9fb_story.html.

² Federal Emergency Management Agency, "President Donald J. Trump Signs Emergency Declaration for Puerto Rico," January 7, 2020, <https://www.fema.gov/news-release/2020/01/07/president-donald-j-trump-signs-emergency-declaration-puerto-rico>.

³ NPR, "How Puerto Rico's Debt Created A Perfect Storm Before The Storm," Laura Sullivan, May 2, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/05/02/607032585/how-puerto-ricos-debt-created-a-perfect-storm-before-the-storm>.


⁴ Washington Post, "Puerto Rico, with \$73 billion in debt, forced toward bankruptcy," Thomas Heath and Tory Newmyer, May 3, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/puerto-rico-with-73-billion-in-debt-forced-toward-bankruptcy/2017/05/03/92e39d76-3020-11e7-9534-00e4656c22aa_story.html.

⁵ New York Times, "'Scarier' Than Hurricane Maria: A Deadly Earthquake Terrifies Puerto Rico," Edmy Ayala, Patricia Mazzei, Frances Robles, and Sandra Garcia, January 7, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/07/us/puerto-rico-earthquake.html>.


Puerto Rico.”⁶ Reports also demonstrate that the federal government has failed to disburse all of the aid promised after Hurricane Maria to help the island recover.⁷ As of November 2019, the federal government has “disbursed about \$14 billion in aid to Puerto Rico, out of an estimated \$91 billion that will be needed over the next two decades.”⁸ As Puerto Rico faces new challenges in the wake of these strong earthquakes, the federal government must not stand in the way of Puerto Rico’s recovery.

Under the *Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act*, you have the discretionary authority to adjust the cost-share,⁹ which you exercised when you adjusted the cost-share for Puerto Rico for certain disaster assistance activities after Hurricane Maria.¹⁰ We urge you to again adjust the cost-share to a 100% federal share for Puerto Rico to help the island respond and recover. Without quick action to adjust the cost-share, Puerto Rico may be unable to receive or be delayed in receiving critical assistance needed to make emergency repairs to public facilities and infrastructure.

Sincerely,



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



Nydia Velázquez
Member of Congress



Bennie G. Thompson
Member of Congress

⁶ NPR, “FEMA Report Acknowledges Failures In Puerto Rico Disaster Response,” Laura Sullivan and Emma Schwartz, July 13, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/07/13/628861808/fema-report-acknowledges-failures-in-puerto-rico-disaster-response>.

⁷ New York Times, “FEMA’s Hurricane Aid to Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands Has Stalled,” Mark Walker and Zolan Kanno-Youngs, November 27, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/27/us/politics/fema-hurricane-aid-puerto-rico-virgin-islands.html>.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act, Public Law 100-707.

¹⁰ Federal Emergency Management Agency, “President Donald J. Trump Amends Puerto Rico Disaster Declaration,” May 24, 2018, <https://www.fema.gov/news-release/2018/05/24/president-donald-j-trump-amends-puerto-rico-disaster-declaration>.