

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

February 26, 2019

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

Dear Chairman Alexander:

We write to request again that the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions (HELP) hold hearings to assess the challenges facing the health and educational systems in 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 set you a letter echoing this request.² Then, on September 25, 2018, shortly after the one-year anniversary since Hurricane Maria made landfall in Puerto Rico, eight HELP Committee members wrote you again to request the hearings.³ Still, the Committee has not convened a single hearing on any aspect of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands' recovery, and there appear to be no plans yet for the Committee to do so. More than 16 months after Hurricane Maria, the Committee so far has failed the more than 3 million U.S. citizens who reside in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

These hearings are beyond overdue. Hurricane Maria has proved to be the deadliest natural disaster in recent U.S. history.⁴ Since our last request for hearings in September 2018, 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, even as the challenges mentioned in our previous letters remain critical.

Puerto Rico's health care system and public health situation both show substantial ongoing difficulties. There are signs that the opioid crisis in Puerto Rico is picking up momentum.⁵ A survey of community health centers in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands found that 70% reported that their patients were likelier since the hurricane to have suicidal thoughts or attempts,

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 Letter from Senator Elizabeth Warren, et al to Chairman Lamar Alexander, September 25, 2018, <https://www.warren.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/2018.09.25%20Letter%20to%20Alexander%20on%20Puerto%20Rico%20hearing.pdf>.

⁴ 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/>.

⁵ Associated Press, "Growing opioid crisis adds to Puerto Rico's problems," Danica Coto, January 7, 2019, <https://www.apnews.com/2636642b00e14f8b84f7e6e71a9ee1f7>.

alcohol or other substance use disorders, and poorly managed chronic conditions.⁶ Due to the cap on Medicaid funds for Puerto Rico, Medicaid patients on the island are not receiving life-saving hepatitis C medications.⁷ A recent study by researchers at the University of Michigan and the University of Utah found that the federal government responded less quickly to Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico than to recent hurricanes that struck the mainland, and that “the insufficient response received by Puerto Rico raises concern for growth in health disparities and increases in adverse health outcomes.”⁸

The health care system in the U.S. Virgin Island also continues to face challenges. Medical executives recently told local legislators that U.S. Virgin Islands hospitals, while making “varying degrees of progress,” faced serious financial burdens associated with the continued cost of hurricane recovery.⁹ The Charlotte Kimelman Cancer Institute at the Schneider Regional Medical Center, for example, is still out of commission “due to lack of funding for repairs.”¹⁰ Key community health facilities on St. John also “remain inoperable” as a result of the 2017 hurricane season.¹¹ Both facilities are still in the process of constructing additional modular facilities to meet the territory’s pressing medical needs.¹²

In addition, the education systems in the territories remain burdened in the wake of the hurricanes. Infrastructural repairs to educational facilities in the U.S. Virgin Islands are still ongoing.¹³ Meanwhile, the University of Puerto Rico (UPR) faces dramatic cutbacks and tuition increases, even as it has struggled to receive federal assistance,¹⁴ and all 11 UPR campuses are now at risk of having their accreditation revoked.¹⁵ According to recent reports from Puerto Rico’s Secretary of Education, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has plans to cut \$1 billion in aid for Puerto Rico schools.¹⁶ Furthermore, the Department of Education inefficiently and ineffectively distributed disaster relief funds to institutions of higher education affected by the 2017 hurricane season, developing a process by which Puerto Rican

⁶ Kaiser Family Foundation, “The Recovery of Community Health Centers in Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands One Year after Hurricanes Maria and Irma,” Jessica Sharac, et al., September 19, 2018, <https://www.kff.org/report-section/the-recovery-of-community-health-centers-in-puerto-rico-and-the-us-virgin-islands-one-year-after-hurricanes-maria-and-irma-issue-brief/>.

⁷ Kaiser Health News, “People in Puerto Rico Can’t Get the Same Hepatitis C Meds as Other American Citizens Do,” Carmen Heredia Rodriguez, January 4, 2019, https://tonic.vice.com/en_us/article/8xpj3p/puerto-rico-hepatitis-c-meds-medicare.

⁸ BMJ Global Health, “Quantifying inequities in US federal response to hurricane disaster in Texas and Florida compared with Puerto Rico,” Charley E. Willison, et al., January 18, 2019, <https://gh.bmj.com/content/4/1/e001191>.

⁹ St. John Source, “Hospitals Report Both Progress and ‘Mountain of Debt,’” April Knight, February 5, 2019, <https://stjohnsource.com/2019/02/05/hospitals-report-both-progress-and-mountain-of-debt/>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ St. John Source, “USVI Still ‘Mired in Financial Crisis’; Structural Deficit at \$415M,” April Knight, February 6, 2019, <https://stjohnsource.com/2019/02/06/usvi-still-mired-in-financial-crisis-structural-deficit-at-415m/>.

¹⁴ The Nation, “When Disaster Capitalism Comes for the University of Puerto Rico,” Rima Brusi, Yarimar Bonilla, and Isar Godreau, September 20, 2018, <https://www.thenation.com/article/when-disaster-capitalism-comes-for-the-university-of-puerto-rico/>.

¹⁵ Inside Higher Ed, “All 11 U of Puerto Rico Institutions Placed on Show Cause,” Rick Seltzer, January 11, 2019, <https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2019/01/11/all-11-u-puerto-rico-institutions-placed-show-cause>.

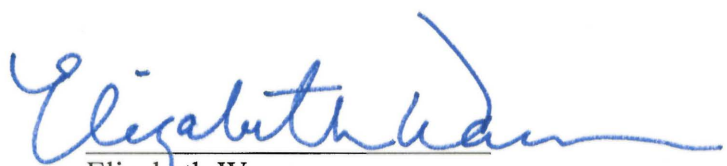
¹⁶ El Nuevo Día, “FEMA recorta fondos para reparar escuelas,” Keila López Alicea and José A. Delgado, February 4, 2019, <https://www.elnuevodia.com/noticias/locales/nota/femarecortafondospararepararescuelas-2474643/>.

institutions—facing the second largest power blackout in world history—were required to fill out burdensome online applications in order to receive aid. The Department then failed to adequately respond to congressional questions about their aid distribution process—further justifying oversight hearings from the HELP Committee.¹⁷

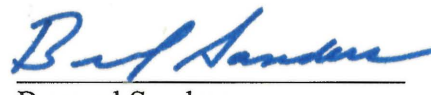
These examples represent a small sample of the pressing issues within the jurisdiction of the HELP Committee that are affecting Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. As our previous letters have pointed out, we have a responsibility to exercise our oversight responsibilities to ensure that our fellow U.S. citizens struggling with the aftermath of enormous catastrophes receive the resources and assistance they need to recover from the hurricanes 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.

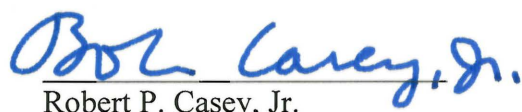
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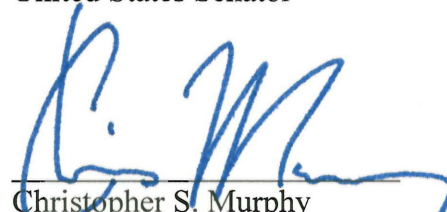
Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



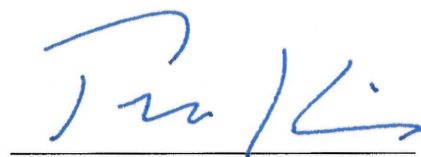
Bernard Sanders
United States Senator



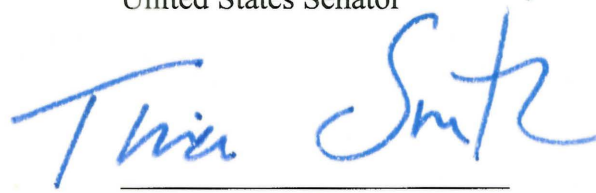
Robert P. Casey, Jr.
United States Senator



Christopher S. Murphy
United States Senator



Tim Kaine
United States Senator



Tina Smith
United States Senator

¹⁷ Letter from Representative Nydia Velázquez, et al., to Secretary Betsey DeVos, April 5, 2018, <https://serrano.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/serrano-velazquez-and-gillibrand-urge-education-department-revise>; Letter from Representative Nydia Velázquez, et al., to Secretary Betsey DeVos, May 23, 2018, <https://www.warren.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/2018.05.22%20Letter%20to%20DeVos%20re%20process%20to%20distribute%20disaster%20funding%20to%20colleges%20impacted%20by%20hurricanes.pdf>; Letter from Representative José Serrano et al., September 14, 2018, <https://www.warren.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/2018-09-14%20Letter%20to%20ED%20on%20Puerto%20Rico%20DCEDS%20and%20EAI%20concerns.pdf>.