

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

December 21, 2017

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 today to request that the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions 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. Given the extent of the damage inflicted upon both territories, as well as the important roles of the departments under this committee's jurisdiction in ongoing hurricane relief efforts, we believe such hearings would be an important part of the Committee's oversight related to hurricane recovery.

Hurricane Irma—a Category 5 hurricane with 185 mile-per-hour winds—tore across the U.S. Virgin Islands (U.S.V.I.) on September 6, leaving the island's infrastructure “destroyed,” its roads “impassable,” and its neighborhoods in “rubble.”<sup>1</sup> Just weeks later, Hurricane Maria—another Category 5 storm—hit the U.S.V.I., further devastating the territory.<sup>2</sup> Maria then made landfall on Puerto Rico as a Category 4 hurricane, leaving millions without power or access to clean drinking water.<sup>3</sup>

Though extensive relief efforts are underway in both the U.S.V.I. and Puerto Rico, the territories face a long road to full recovery. To date, a majority of Virgin Islanders<sup>4</sup> and at least 1 million Puerto Ricans (about one-third of the island's residents, though the actual number could be far

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Sheetz, “The US Virgin Islands, devastated by Hurricane Irma, are in serious need of aid,” *CNBC*, Sept. 13, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/09/13/the-us-virgin-islands-devastated-by-hurricane-irma-are-in-serious-need-of-aid.html>; Mark Fischetti, “Just How Strong is Hurricane Irma?” *Scientific American*, Sept. 6, 2017, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/just-how-strong-is-hurricane-irma/>.

<sup>2</sup> Jeremy W. Peters, “In the Virgin Islands, Hurricane Maria Drowned What Irma Didn't Destroy,” *New York Times*, Sept. 27, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/27/us/hurricane-maria-virgin-islands.html>.

<sup>3</sup> “Puerto Rico Loses Power and Sets a Curfew,” *New York Times*, Sept. 20, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/20/us/hurricane-maria-puerto-rico.html>.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Homeland Security, FEMA, “A Sign of Recovery: Power Returning to U.S. Virgin Islands.” Nov. 21, 2017, <https://www.fema.gov/news-release/2017/11/21/sign-recovery-power-returning-us-virgin-islands>; “37 Percent of St. Croix, 48 Percent of St. Thomas and 47 Percent of St. John Now Restored with Power, WAPA Says. Here's the Latest Update,” *Virgin Islands Consortium*, Nov. 28, 2017, <http://viconsortium.com/featured/37-percent-of-st-croix-48-percent-of-st-thomas-and-47-percent-of-st-john-now-restored-with-power-wapa-says-heres-the-latest-update/>.

higher)<sup>5</sup> remain without power. Significant progress has been made to expand access to clean drinking water, but a boil water advisory remains in effect for Puerto Rico and part of the U.S.V.I.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, deliveries of critical supplies—including tarps, medical products, generators, and food—have been delayed, slowing relief efforts, causing price spikes, and in some cases leading to dangerous shortages.<sup>7</sup>

As a result of the infrastructure damage caused by Hurricanes Irma and Maria, both Puerto Rico and the U.S.V.I are facing critical health crises. Dr. Jerome Adams, U.S. Surgeon General, said in the wake of the hurricanes that the “situation ... is unlike anything that we’ve encountered before.”<sup>8</sup> Surgeon General Adams visited both territories after the hurricanes.<sup>9</sup> In Puerto Rico, though the official fatality count due to Hurricane Maria is listed as 64, multiple reports indicate that the true death toll is much higher.<sup>10</sup> One recent study suggests that “the actual death count may be closer to 1,085,”<sup>11</sup> while another review of mortality statistics suggests “1,052 more

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<sup>5</sup> StatusPR, AEE Generation, Dec. 21, 2017, <http://status.pr>; Arelis R. Hernández, Whitney Leaming, and Zoëann Murphy, “Sin Luz: Life Without Power,” *Washington Post*, Dec. 14, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/national/puerto-rico-life-without-power/>.

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of Homeland Security, FEMA, “Hurricane Maria,” Dec. 21, 2017, [https://www.fema.gov/hurricane-maria?utm\\_source=hp\\_promo&utm\\_medium=web&utm\\_campaign=disaster](https://www.fema.gov/hurricane-maria?utm_source=hp_promo&utm_medium=web&utm_campaign=disaster); Samantha Raphaelson, “2 Months After Maria And Irma, U.S. Virgin Islands Remain In The Dark,” NPR Here & Now, Nov. 14, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/2017/11/14/564138720/2-months-after-maria-and-irma-u-s-virgin-islands-remain-in-the-dark>.

<sup>7</sup> Tami Abdollah, “AP Exclusive: Big contracts, no storm tarps for Puerto Rico,” *Associated Press*, Nov. 28, 2017, <https://www.apnews.com/cbeff1a939324610b7a02b88f30eafbb>; U.S. Food and Drug Administration, “Statement by FDA Commissioner Scott Gottlieb, M.D., updating on Puerto Rico related medical product shortages,” statement, Nov. 30, 2017, <https://www.fda.gov/NewsEvents/Newsroom/PressAnnouncements/ucm587290.htm>; Timothy L. O’Brien, “Puerto Rico Could Use Some More Big Government,” *Bloomberg*, Nov. 17, 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2017-11-17/puerto-rico-could-use-some-more-big-government>; Michelle Kantrow, “MIDA: 2 mo.’s after Hurricane Maria, container backlog, product shortages persist,” *News is my Business*, Nov. 22, 2017, <http://newsismybusiness.com/hurricane-container-shortages/>; Laura M. Quintero, “Crisis de alimentos ‘mucho peor,’” *El Vocero*, Dec. 6, 2017, [http://www.elvocero.com/actualidad/crisis-de-alimentos-mucho-peor/article\\_601ba5da-d95f-11e7-89cb-cba83a7df6f4.html](http://www.elvocero.com/actualidad/crisis-de-alimentos-mucho-peor/article_601ba5da-d95f-11e7-89cb-cba83a7df6f4.html).

<sup>8</sup> “Surgeon General: Puerto Rico public health crisis ‘unlike anything’ encountered before,” Sinclair Broadcast Group, Sept. 29, 2017, <http://wjla.com/news/nation-world/surgeon-general-puerto-rico-public-health-crisis-unlike-anything-encountered-before>.

<sup>9</sup> Marina Leonard, “U.S. Surgeon General Visits to Help Plan Modular Hospital Units,” *St. Thomas Source*, Oct. 6, 2017, <https://sithomassource.com/content/2017/10/06/u-s-surgeon-general-visits-to-help-plan-modular-hospital-units/>; Arelis R. Hernández, “‘If there is no water, disease will come’: Many in Puerto Rico still lack water service,” *Washington Post*, Oct. 3, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/if-there-is-no-water-disease-will-come-many-in-puerto-rico-still-lack-water-service/2017/10/03/afc2a60a-a85f-11e7-b3aa-c0e2e1d41e38\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/if-there-is-no-water-disease-will-come-many-in-puerto-rico-still-lack-water-service/2017/10/03/afc2a60a-a85f-11e7-b3aa-c0e2e1d41e38_story.html).

<sup>10</sup> Nidhi Prakash, “Puerto Rico’s Government Just Admitted 911 People Died After The Hurricane—Of ‘Natural Causes,’” *Buzzfeed*, Oct. 27, 2017, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/nidhiprakash/puerto-rico-natural-causes>; Frances Robles, “Puerto Rico Deaths Spike, but Few Are Attributed to Hurricane,” *New York Times*, Nov. 8, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/08/us/puerto-rico-deaths-fema.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Eliza Barclay and Alexia Fernández Campbell, “New data shows hurricane deaths in Puerto Rico could be 20 times higher than the government claims,” *Vox*, Nov. 29, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/11/29/16623926/puerto-rico-death-toll-hurricane-maria-count>.

people than usual died across” Puerto Rico in the 42 days after the hurricane struck.<sup>12</sup> Cases of waterborne diseases, like leptospirosis, have been documented in both territories, while standing water left over from flooding has increased the risk of mosquito-borne illnesses.<sup>13</sup> Dr. Brenda Fitzgerald, Director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), visited both territories in November to assess recovery efforts. As of November 29, 2017, CDC had deployed 148 staff to Puerto Rico and the U.S.V.I.<sup>14</sup> The CDC has also identified rebuilding and restoring public health laboratory capacity as a critical public health challenge.<sup>15</sup>

Without access to consistent electricity, Puerto Ricans’ ability to maintain the quality of their medications, particularly those that require refrigeration, is limited.<sup>16</sup> In addition, the capacity of Puerto-Rico-based medical product manufacturers has been severely curtailed, and shortages of saline and intravenous amino acids have been declared in the United States as a result.<sup>17</sup> Dr. Scott Gottlieb, Commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), visited Puerto Rico shortly after Hurricane Maria, and he has noted that many medical products used throughout the United States are manufactured on the island.<sup>18</sup> He testified that the FDA is very involved in helping to “maintain[] a continuous supply of the most critical medical products” manufactured on Puerto Rico.<sup>19</sup> Many of Puerto Rico’s hospitals still lack reliable electricity,<sup>20</sup> and U.S.V.I. hospitals are limited in the services they can provide, requiring the airlifting of many patients to the mainland.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, public health officials in Puerto Rico have warned that “much of the population [is] showing symptoms of post-traumatic stress” as a result of Hurricane Maria,

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<sup>12</sup> Frances Robles, Kenan Davis, Sheri Fink, and Sarah Almukhtar, “Official Toll in Puerto Rico: 64. Actual Deaths May Be 1,052,” *New York Times*, Dec. 9, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/12/08/us/puerto-rico-hurricane-maria-death-toll.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Office of Senator Elizabeth Warren, “Warren, Colleagues Seek Information on Water- and Vector-Borne Diseases in Puerto Rico and U.S. Virgin Islands,” press release, Nov. 7, 2017, [https://www.warren.senate.gov/?p=press\\_release&id=2053](https://www.warren.senate.gov/?p=press_release&id=2053); Daniella Silva, “Puerto Ricans at Risk of Waterborne Disease Outbreaks in Wake of Hurricane Maria,” *NBC News*, Oct. 26, 2017, <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/puerto-rico-crisis/puerto-ricans-risk-waterborne-disease-outbreaks-wake-hurricane-maria-n814461>.

<sup>14</sup> Letter from Director Brenda Fitzgerald to Senator Elizabeth Warren, Dec. 5, 2017.

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*

<sup>16</sup> Jeffrey Kopman, “Health Crisis in Puerto Rico is Likely Just Getting Started,” *The Weather Channel*, Oct. 20, 2017, <https://weather.com/storms/hurricane/news/health-crisis-puerto-rico-getting-started>; Dianna Cahn, “The last straw: Puerto Rico’s vulnerable—veterans, the elderly—outmatched by Maria,” *Stars and Stripes*, Nov. 20, 2017, <https://www.stripes.com/the-last-straw-puerto-rico-s-vulnerable-veterans-the-elderly-outmatched-by-maria-1.498673>.

<sup>17</sup> Alison Kodjak, “Hurricane Damage to Manufacturers in Puerto Rico Affects Mainland Hospitals, Too,” *National Public Radio*, Nov. 15, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2017/11/15/564203110/hurricane-damage-to-manufacturers-in-puerto-rico-affects-mainland-hospitals-too>.

<sup>18</sup> Written testimony of Scott Gottlieb, M.D., Commissioner of Food and Drugs, before the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, House Committee on Energy and Commerce, Oct. 24, 2017 (<http://docs.house.gov/meetings/IF/IF02/20171024/106530/HHRG-115-IF02-Wstate-GottliebMDS-20171024.pdf>).

<sup>19</sup> *Id.*

<sup>20</sup> StatusPR, “Hospitals Assisted by Local / Federal Health Dept.,” Dec. 5, 2017, <http://status.pr/Lists/List/Hospitals>.

<sup>21</sup> Judi Shimek, “Health Commissioner Seeking V.I. Medevacs in Puerto Rico,” *St. Thomas Source*, Nov. 29, 2017, <https://stthomassource.com/content/2017/11/29/health-commissioner-seeking-v-i-medevacs-in-puerto-rico/>.

raising the risk of a “full-fledged mental health crisis on the island.”<sup>22</sup> U.S.V.I. residents are experiencing similar challenges.<sup>23</sup>

The hurricanes also devastated the territories’ education systems. Students in the U.S.V.I. and Puerto Rico missed weeks of school as a result of the hurricanes.<sup>24</sup> Though some of Puerto Rico’s 1,113 public schools have re-opened,<sup>25</sup> the island’s Secretary of Education estimates that up to 20% will “have to be permanently shuttered.” Of the schools that have re-opened, some are still filled with debris and have no running water or electricity.<sup>26</sup> School districts throughout the U.S. mainland—including in Florida, New York, and Massachusetts—have seen an influx of Puerto Rican students, placing additional strain on already-limited public education budgets.<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile, the hurricanes closed dozens of college campuses and displaced hundreds of thousands of college students.<sup>28</sup> And inconsistent—or nonexistent—access to electricity and Internet service complicated student borrowers’ ability to repay their student loans.<sup>29</sup>

The Senate HELP Committee’s jurisdiction includes the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Education.<sup>30</sup> Hearings could help ensure that the Senate has a detailed understanding of the health and education challenges facing Puerto Rico and the U.S.V.I., as well as an understanding of how Departments under the Committee’s purview have provided relief, and how they can improve relief efforts. Hearings could address such topics as the stability of the health care systems of the U.S.V.I. and Puerto Rico, and the ability of medical facilities to provide healthcare; the impact of infrastructure damage on U.S.V.I. and Puerto Rican residents’ access to medical care; the extent of water- and vector-borne disease outbreaks in the U.S.V.I. and Puerto Rico; the adequacy of the Department of Health and Human Services’

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<sup>22</sup> Caitlin Dickerson, “After Hurricane, Signs of a Mental Health Crisis Haunt Puerto Rico,” *New York Times*, Nov. 13, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/13/us/puerto-rico-hurricane-maria-mental-health.html>.

<sup>23</sup> Richard Pérez-Peña, “After Irma and Maria: How 3 Spots on the U.S. Virgin Islands are Faring,” *New York Times*, Nov. 16, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/10/us/virgin-islands-hurricanes.html>; Samantha Raphelson, “2 Months After Maria and Irma, U.S. Virgin Islands Remain In the Dark,” *National Public Radio*, Nov. 14, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/2017/11/14/564138720/2-months-after-maria-and-irma-u-s-virgin-islands-remain-in-the-dark>; Sean Breslin, “Six Weeks After Hurricane Maria, U.S. Virgin Islands Still Plagued by Food Shortages, Power Outages,” *The Weather Channel*, Nov. 1, 2017, <https://weather.com/news/news/2017-11-01-us-virgin-islands-recovery-hurricane-maria>.

<sup>24</sup> Aaron Schrank, “Virgin Islands schools set to open as hurricane recovery continues,” *Marketplace*, Oct. 9, 2017, <https://www.marketplace.org/2017/10/09/education/schools-across-virgin-islands-set-open-hurricane-recovery-continues>; Ralph Ellis, “Puerto Rico public schools may not reopen for weeks,” *CNN*, Oct. 1, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/10/01/us/puerto-rico-schools-closed-for-weeks/index.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Ralph Ellis, “Puerto Rico public schools may not reopen for weeks,” *CNN*, Oct. 1, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/10/01/us/puerto-rico-schools-closed-for-weeks/index.html>.

<sup>26</sup> Kyra Gurney, “Puerto Rico reopens 119 schools but it could be months, or never, for nearly 1,000 more,” *Miami Herald*, Oct. 24, 2017, <http://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/education/article180711506.html>.

<sup>27</sup> Joseph De Avila and Arian Campo-Flores, “School Systems Prepare for Puerto Rican Students,” *Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 2, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/school-systems-prepare-for-puerto-rican-students-1506950024>.

<sup>28</sup> Letter for Senators Nelson, Murray, Murphy, Warren, Harris, Blumenthal, Gillibrand, Booker, and Cantwell to Secretary DeVos, Oct. 20, 2017, [https://www.warren.senate.gov/files/documents/2017\\_10\\_20\\_Letter\\_to\\_DeVos\\_Hurricanes.pdf](https://www.warren.senate.gov/files/documents/2017_10_20_Letter_to_DeVos_Hurricanes.pdf).

<sup>29</sup> *Id.*

<sup>30</sup> U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions, “Issues,” <https://www.help.senate.gov/about/issues/>.

response to Hurricanes Irma and Maria; the short- and long-term impacts of Hurricanes Irma and Maria on the territories' educational systems, and the capacity of state, local, and federal resources to address ongoing education challenges; the impact of the influx of students from the U.S.V.I. and Puerto Rico to the U.S. mainland on state education systems and the readiness of these systems to meet the unique needs of the students fleeing the territories, and the role of the Department of Education and Congress in assisting these students and school districts; and the challenges facing institutions of higher education, college students, and federal student loan borrowers impacted by the hurricanes, and the adequacy of the Department of Education's response to those challenges.

Thank you for your consideration of this request. We hope you will work with us to ensure that the U.S. citizens still struggling in the aftermath of Hurricanes Irma and Maria receive the resources and assistance they need to recover from these disasters.

Sincerely,



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Elizabeth Warren  
United States Senator



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Bill Cassidy  
United States Senator



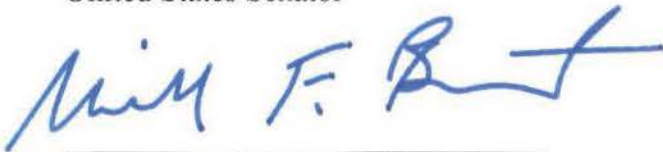
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Bernard Sanders  
United States Senator



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Robert P. Casey, Jr.  
United States Senator



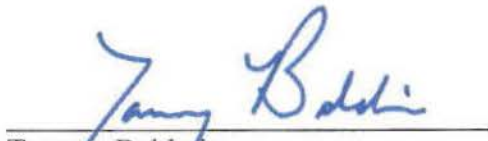
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Michael F. Bennet  
United States Senator



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Sheldon Whitehouse  
United States Senator



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Tammy Baldwin  
United States Senator



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Christopher Murphy  
United States Senator



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Tim Kaine  
United States Senator