

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

January 19, 2018

Elinore McCance-Katz
Assistant Secretary for Mental Health and Substance Use
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
5600 Fishers Lane
Rockville, MD 20857

Dear Assistant Secretary McCance-Katz,

We write today to request information regarding the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMSHA) efforts to address mental health challenges in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands in the aftermath of Hurricanes Irma and Maria.

SAMHSA leads the nation's efforts to "reduce the impact of...mental illness on America's communities."¹ As part of these efforts, SAMHSA runs the Disaster Distress Hotline to provide "counseling and support to people experiencing emotional distress related to natural or human-caused disasters."² SAMHSA's Disaster Technical Assistance Center offers short- and long-term disaster relief grants to support "community-based outreach, counseling, and other mental health services to survivors."³ And SAMHSA works in tandem with other Department of Health and Human Services offices and agencies, and with other federal agencies, to aid with disaster recovery—including recovery in the aftermath of hurricanes.

Hurricane Irma tore across the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI) on September 6, 2017, leaving the island's infrastructure "destroyed" and its neighborhoods in "rubble."⁴ It took over 120 days to restore power to most of the USVI's population. Today, some USVI Water and Power Authority customers remain without electricity, and over 9,100 live in homes "that still need to be rebuilt or fixed before they can be hooked up to the [electrical] grid again."⁵ USVI schools,

¹ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, "Who We Are" (online at <https://www.samhsa.gov/about-us/who-we-are>).

² Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, "Disaster Distress Hotline" (online at <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/disaster-distress-helpline>).

³ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, "Crisis Counseling Assistance and Training Program (CCP)" (online at <https://www.samhsa.gov/dtac/ccp>).

⁴ Michael Sheetz, "The US Virgin Islands, devastated by Hurricane Irma, are in serious need of aid," *CNBC* (September 13, 2017) (online at <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* (September 6, 2017) (online at <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/just-how-strong-is-hurricane-irma/>).

⁵ Patricia Mazzei, "Power is Restored to Most of U.S. Virgin Islands After Hurricanes, Officials Say," *New York Times* (January 9, 2018) (online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/09/us/virgin-islands-power.html>).

as well as its tourism industry—a critical component of the islands’ economy--continue to struggle in Irma’s aftermath.⁶

Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico on September 20, 2017. The storm was a “catastrophic event” that cut off power, and access to clean water and basic sanitation to millions.⁷ More than 114 days after Hurricane Maria’s landfall, the situation on the island remains critical. About 40% of the population is still without power, according to official estimates⁸ Studies suggest that more than 1,000 people died during, or in the aftermath of, the storm.⁹ Puerto Rico’s health system is under “unimaginable” stress;¹⁰ its schools have yet to fully reopen; and its businesses continue to struggle in the face of a “scarcity of goods.”¹¹

Hurricanes and tropical storms can trigger emotional distress in individuals who experience them. SAMHSA notes that that “[f]eelings such as overwhelming anxiety, constant worrying, trouble sleeping, and other depression-like symptoms are common responses before, during, and after” hurricanes and tropical storms. Storm survivors, in particular, can find themselves “fearing that forecasted storms may develop into a hurricane, even when the chances...are low” and “having thoughts, memories or nightmares related to the storm.”¹²

Hurricane survivors in Puerto Rico and the USVI have experienced and continue to experience this emotional toll. In the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, Puerto Rican health officials warned that “much of the [Puerto Rican] population [was] showing symptoms of post-traumatic stress,” raising the risk of a “full-fledged mental health crisis on the island.”¹³ In the days and weeks after the storm, residents reported feeling “depressed,” “drained,” and filled with “widespread despair.”¹⁴ Physicians cite a return to routine as “the most important step toward overcoming trauma,” yet the devastation wrought by the hurricane has prevented many Puerto

⁶ Patricia Mazzei, “Power is Restored to Most of U.S. Virgin Islands After Hurricanes, Officials Say,” *New York Times* (January 9, 2018) (online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/09/us/virgin-islands-power.html>).

⁷ Robinson Meyer, “What’s Happening With the Relief Effort in Puerto Rico?” *The Atlantic* (October 4, 2017) (online at <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2017/10/what-happened-in-puerto-rico-a-timeline-of-hurricane-maria/541956/>).

⁸ See statusPr (online at <http://status.pr>).

⁹ Frances Robles, Kenan Davis, Sheri Fink, and Sarah Almukhtar, “Official Toll in Puerto Rico: 64. Actual Deaths May Be 1,052.” *New York Times* (December 9, 2017) (online at

https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/12/08/us/puerto-rico-hurricane-maria-death-toll.html?_r=0); Patricia Mazzei, “Puerto Rico Orders Review and Recount of Hurricane Deaths,” *New York Times* (December 18, 2017) (online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/18/us/puerto-rico-hurricane-maria-death-toll-review.html>).

¹⁰ Michael Joe Murphy, “Puerto Rico health care under ‘unimaginable’ stress after Hurricane Maria,” *Orlando Sentinel* (December 19, 2017) (online at <http://www.orlandosentinel.com/opinion/os-ed-puerto-rico-health-care-scrambles-after-hurricane-interview-20171218-story.html>).

¹¹ PBS News Hour, “Traumatized Puerto Ricans see uncertain, insecure future” (January 18, 2018) (online at <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/traumatized-puerto-ricans-see-uncertain-insecure-future>).

¹² Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, “Hurricanes and Tropical Storms” (last updated September 8, 2017) (online at <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/disaster-distress-helpline/disaster-types/hurricanes>).

¹³ Caitlin Dickerson, “After Hurricane, Signs of a Mental Health Crisis Haunt Puerto Rico,” *New York Times* (November 13, 2017) (online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/13/us/puerto-rico-hurricane-maria-mental-health.html?mtrref=undefined>).

¹⁴ Associated Press, “Puerto Rico confronts mental health crisis in hurricane’s aftermath,” *New York Post* (October 5, 2017) (online at <https://nypost.com/2017/10/05/puerto-rico-confronts-mental-health-crisis-in-hurricanes-aftermath/>).

Ricans from returning to work, school, and other daily tasks. Many residents “report[ed] intense feelings of anxiety and depression for the first time in their lives,” while individuals with pre-existing mental health conditions lost access to critical care and medication.¹⁵ When we visited Concilio de Salud Integral de Loíza in Puerto Rico last week, officials at the community health center echoed these reports. Hospitals reported an influx of patients with suicidal thoughts, and the suicide rate increased by 30%.¹⁶

On October 11, 2017, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) awarded Puerto Rico’s Administration of Mental Health and Anti-Addiction Services (ASSMCA) a \$3 million grant to provide counseling and emotional support services across the island.¹⁷ In response, ASSMCA hired and trained over 300 facilitators to provide mental health care in the communities most affected by the hurricane.¹⁸ Yet Puerto Rico’s resources remain strained.

Puerto Rico has a single suicide prevention hotline—Línea Pas, operated by ASSMCA—with just twelve crisis counselors answering phones at a time. Línea Pas has seen an influx of calls, forcing employees to work extra hours.¹⁹ And, though FEMA’s recent grant allowed for the hiring of additional mental health facilitators, it is unclear whether Puerto Rico has received other federal resources to combat a mental health crisis. SAMHSA operates a national network of crisis centers through its Suicide Prevention Lifeline,²⁰ yet Puerto Rico does not have a Lifeline-affiliated call center.²¹ Furthermore, there are no Puerto Rican grantees of SAMHSA’s Suicide Prevention Resource Center’s Garrett Lee Smith Campus Suicide Prevention grants, National Strategy for Suicide Prevention grants, or Zero Suicide grants.²²

Meanwhile, in the aftermath of Hurricane Irma, a USVI mental health provider noted that many USVI residents were “feeling overwhelmed and having to rebuild and repair, in some situations, their entire lives. [...] People who have mental health disorders are even more at risk because they have fewer coping skills.”²³ Doctors on the mainland United States have reported an increase in patients from the USVI seeking mental health treatment for the “severe trauma”

¹⁵ Caitlin Dickerson, “After Hurricane, Signs of a Mental Health Crisis Haunt Puerto Rico,” *New York Times* (November 13, 2017) (online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/13/us/puerto-rico-hurricane-maria-mental-health.html?mtrref=undefined>).

¹⁶ Dr. Oxiris Barbot, “Puerto Rico’s mental health crisis,” *New York Daily News* (January 6, 2018) (online at <http://www.nydailynews.com/opinion/puerto-rico-mental-health-crisis-article-1.3740562>); Caitlin Dickerson and Ted Bourne, “Inside a Suicide Prevention Center in Puerto Rico,” *New York Times* (online at <https://www.nytimes.com/video/us/100000005620786/hurricane-maria-puerto-rico-mental-health.html>).

¹⁷ Génesis Ibara, “FEMA assigns \$3M for emotional support in Puerto Rico,” *Caribbean Business* (October 12, 2017) (online at <http://caribbeanbusiness.com/fema-assigns-3m-for-emotional-support-in-puerto-rico/>).

¹⁸ “ASSMCA trains 300 mental health facilitators to provide support after Maria” *WIPR* (November 3, 2017) (online at <http://www.wipr.pr/assmca-adiestra-300-facilitadores-de-salud-mental-para-brindar-apoyo-tras-maria/>).

¹⁹ Caitlin Dickerson and Ted Bourne, “Inside a Suicide Prevention Center in Puerto Rico,” *New York Times* (online at <https://www.nytimes.com/video/us/100000005620786/hurricane-maria-puerto-rico-mental-health.html>).

²⁰ National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, “About” (online at <https://suicidpreventionlifeline.org/about/>).

²¹ National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, “The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline and Puerto Rico” (2017) (online at <https://www.sprc.org/states/puerto-rico>).

²² Suicide Prevention Resource Center, “Grantees” (online at <https://www.sprc.org/grantees>); Suicide Prevention Resource Center, “Puerto Rico” (online at <https://www.sprc.org/states/puerto-rico>).

²³ Frank Gluck, “Hurricane Irma’s mental health impact will linger longer after the damage is repaired,” *News-Press (USA Today)* (September 17, 2017) (online at <http://www.news-press.com/story/news/2017/09/17/hurricane-irmas-mental-health-impact-linger-long-after-damage-repaired/666742001/>).

they faced during the storm.²⁴ Like Puerto Rico, the USVI has no Lifeline-affiliated mental health crisis call center, and does not appear to have received grants from the Suicide Prevention Resource Center.

To help us better understand the role that SAMHSA has played in recovery efforts in Puerto Rico and the USVI, as well as what additional federal resources may be necessary to combat the growing mental health crisis in both regions, we request that you respond to the following questions no later than January 31, 2018. In addition, we request that you provide our staff with a briefing on these matters no later than February 2, 2018.


1. Please provide a detailed overview of SAMHSA's role in ongoing recovery efforts for Hurricane Maria. What resources, if any, have Puerto Rican officials requested from SAMHSA? What resources has SAMHSA provided?
2. Please provide a detailed overview of SAMHSA's role in ongoing recovery efforts for Hurricane Irma. What resources, if any, have USVI officials requested from SAMHSA? What resources has SAMHSA provided?
3. Reports indicate that Puerto Rico is facing a growing mental health crisis in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria. Does SAMHSA have data or other information shedding light on the extent of the mental health care needs, including information on mental health coverage available under Medicaid and Medicare, facing Puerto Ricans? If so, please provide a summary of that information.
4. Does SAMHSA have data or other information shedding light on the extent of the mental health care needs facing residents of the USVI? If so, please provide a summary of that information.
5. SAMHSA operates the Disaster Distress Hotline.
 - a. How many calls from Puerto Rico has SAMHSA received since September 20, 2017? What has SAMHSA done to advertise the hotline to individuals in Puerto Rico? Have calls to the hotline exceeded or been below expectations?
 - b. How many calls from the USVI has SAMHSA received through its Disaster Distress Hotline since September 6, 2017? What has SAMHSA done to advertise the hotline to individuals in the USVI? Have calls to the hotline exceeded or been below expectations?
 - c. What resources does SAMHSA provide recipients who call the hotline?

²⁴ Abraar Karan, "The Forgotten Needs of Refugees From Hurricane Irma," *National Public Radio* (January 13, 2018) (online at <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2018/01/13/562334629/the-forgotten-needs-of-refugees-from-hurricane-irma>).


6. Working with FEMA, SAMHSA offers short-term Crisis Counseling Assistance and Training Program (CCP) grants up to 60 days after, and longer-term grants for up to 9 months after, a presidential disaster declaration.²⁵
 - a. President Trump issued a major disaster declaration in Puerto Rico as a result of Hurricane Maria on September 20, 2017.²⁶ Did SAMHSA provide any CCP grants to Puerto Rico after the President's disaster declaration?
 - b. President Trump issued a major disaster declaration in the USVI as a result of Hurricane Irma on September 7, 2017.²⁷ Did SAMHSA provide any CCP grants to the USVI after the President's disaster declaration?
7. Please describe the federal resources that SAMHSA provides Puerto Rico for the purposes of improving mental health care. What support, if any, does SAMHSA provide Línea Pas? What additional resources are necessary to ensure that all Puerto Ricans can access affordable mental health counseling services?
8. Please describe the federal resources that SAMHSA provides the USVI for the purposes of improving mental health care. What additional resources are necessary to ensure that all Puerto Ricans can access affordable mental health counseling services?

Please do not hesitate to reach out to Alex Blenkinsopp of Senator Warren's staff at 202-224-4543 with any questions or concerns.


Sincerely,



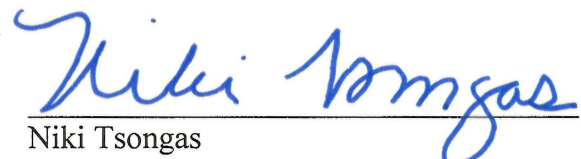
Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator



James P. McGovern
Member of Congress

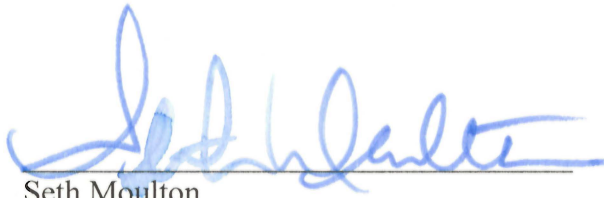


Niki Tsongas
Member of Congress

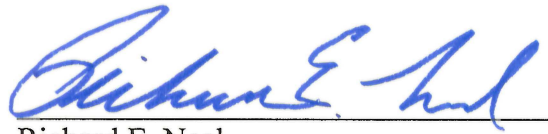
²⁵ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, "Crisis Counseling Assistance and Training Program (CCP)" (online at <https://www.samhsa.gov/dtac/ccp>).

²⁶ U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency, "Puerto Rico Hurricane Maria (DR-4339)" (online at <https://www.fema.gov/disaster/4339>).

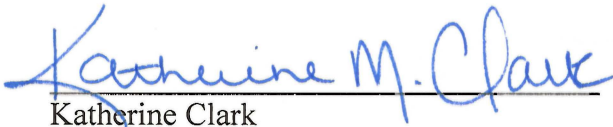
²⁷ U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency, "Virgin Islands Hurricane Irma (DR-4335)" (online at <https://www.fema.gov/disaster/4335>).



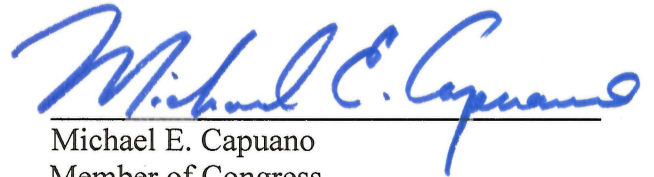
Seth Moulton
Member of Congress



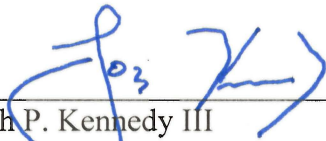
Richard E. Neal
Member of Congress



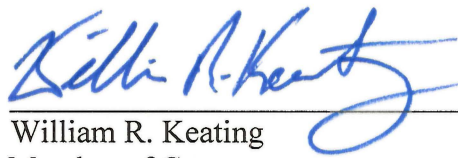
Katherine Clark
Member of Congress



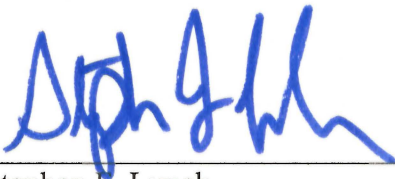
Michael E. Capuano
Member of Congress



Joseph P. Kennedy III
Member of Congress



William R. Keating
Member of Congress



Stephen F. Lynch
Member of Congress