

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

May 15, 2019

Peter T. Gaynor
Acting Administrator
Federal Emergency Management Agency
500 C Street S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20472

Dear Acting Administrator Gaynor:

We write to request information about the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) efforts to reconstruct the only hospital in Vieques, the "ravaged island...off the coast of Puerto Rico."¹ According to recent reports, the Vieques hospital building "remains a shuttered wreck of rust and mold," leaving the 9,000 U.S. citizens living on the island to rely on a "temporary facility" that "still lacks the ability to safely perform key medical procedures."²

On September 20, 2017, Hurricane Maria made landfall on Puerto Rico and devastated the territory. Vieques, located roughly 7 miles off the coast of mainland Puerto Rico, was no exception.³ The island experienced extensive delays in accessing electricity, housing, and medical care in the wake of the storm.⁴ It is unconscionable that over 19 months after Hurricane Maria, U.S. citizens still cannot access comprehensive medical care—and FEMA must take rapid and robust action to provide the hospital with the resources it needs to rebuild.

Notably, Vieques' single hospital—which once housed "the island's only labor and delivery room" and a dialysis center—is still "shuttered" as a result of the storm, now "home to the occasional rooster and a band of wild horses whose droppings litter the empty parking lot and ambulance bay."⁵ In the aftermath of the hurricane, FEMA "set up a temporary hospital for island residents," but the facility, according to experts from the University of Puerto Rico, "lacks

¹ New York Times, "Hunger and an 'Abandoned' Hospital: Puerto Rico Waits as Washington Bickers," Patricia Mazzei, April 7, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/07/us/puerto-rico-trump-vieques.html>.

² Id., Washington Post, "'The colony within the colony': Puerto Rico fumes as FEMA deliberates over remote hospital," Jeff Stein and Dennis M. Rivera Pichardo, May 6, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2019/05/06/colony-within-colony-puerto-rico-fumes-fema-deliberates-over-remote-hospital/?utm_term=.e959d1ac54d8.

³ NBC News, "For the Puerto Rican island of Vieques, rebuilding seems like a never-ending task," Nicole Acevedo and Nirma Hasty, November 3, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/puerto-rico-crisis/puerto-rican-island-vieques-rebuilding-seems-never-ending-task-n924331>.

⁴ Id.

⁵ New York Times, "Hunger and an 'Abandoned' Hospital: Puerto Rico Waits as Washington Bickers," Patricia Mazzei, April 7, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/07/us/puerto-rico-trump-vieques.html>; Huffington Post, "In Puerto Rico, Patients Are Still Waiting For a Dialysis Clinic That May Never Come," Carolina Moreno, October 29, 2018, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/puerto-rico-patients-dialysis-clinic-hurricane-maria_n_5bc11ddde4b0bd9ed55a4cbb.

the ability to safely perform key medical procedures”—leaving *Viequenses* without access to critical care.⁶

Recent reports have documented the harrowing trips that *Viequenses* must take to the Puerto Rican mainland to obtain care. A 64-year-old cancer patient, for example “waited 32 straight hours—sleeping in her car, snacking on chips and soda..., going to the bathroom off the side of the road—before securing a spot on the ferry that took her across the water and then to her doctor in San Juan.”⁷ Pregnant women must “travel...to the big island eight miles away” to deliver their children.⁸ And until temporary dialysis centers arrived on the island in November 2018, Vieques dialysis patients “had to travel...three times a week to get treatment” on the mainland—resulting in multiple deaths.⁹ These delays in medical care are especially disturbing, given that Vieques residents “suffer[] from cancer rates close to 30 percent higher than the rest of Puerto Rico” due to the U.S. Navy’s past use of the island a “military testing ground.”¹⁰

Puerto Rican officials allege that Vieques “secured a commitment,” in writing, “from FEMA more than a year ago to rebuild the hospital.”¹¹ It was Congress’s intent through the Bipartisan Budget Act [P.L. 115-123], which the President signed on February 9, 2018, to require FEMA to replace (or restore) critical service facilities damaged by the storm to industry standard.¹² According to recent reports, however, FEMA has “not decided whether the [Vieques] hospital needs to be rebuilt.”¹³ An initial FEMA assessment of the hospital “determined that [the hospital] qualified for...a building replacement”—but “a later report,” according to a FEMA spokesperson, “found the hospital required only repairs, rather than a full reconstruction.”¹⁴ FEMA is reportedly “awaiting an evaluation from...a separate group of experts” to make a final assessment about the hospital.¹⁵

Vieques residents are U.S. citizens. Like all U.S. citizens, they need and deserve access to high-quality health services—not temporary medical facilities that cannot provide care to patients in need. Vieques has already faced extensive delays in disaster aid, and it is essential that FEMA take all necessary steps to help the island rebuild its medical infrastructure. To help us better

⁶ Washington Post, “‘The colony within the colony’: Puerto Rico fumes as FEMA deliberates over remote hospital,” Jeff Stein and Dennis M. Rivera Pichardo, May 6, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2019/05/06/colony-within-colony-puerto-rico-fumes-fema-deliberates-over-remote-hospital/?utm_term=.e959d1ac54d8.

⁷ Id.

⁸ New York Times, “Hunger and an ‘Abandoned’ Hospital: Puerto Rico Waits as Washington Bickers,” Patricia Mazzei, April 7, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/07/us/puerto-rico-trump-vieques.html>.

⁹ Id.

¹⁰ Washington Post, “‘The colony within the colony’: Puerto Rico fumes as FEMA deliberates over remote hospital,” Jeff Stein and Dennis M. Rivera Pichardo, May 6, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2019/05/06/colony-within-colony-puerto-rico-fumes-fema-deliberates-over-remote-hospital/?utm_term=.e959d1ac54d8.

¹¹ Id.

¹² P.L. 115-123

¹³ Washington Post, “‘The colony within the colony’: Puerto Rico fumes as FEMA deliberates over remote hospital,” Jeff Stein and Dennis M. Rivera Pichardo, May 6, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2019/05/06/colony-within-colony-puerto-rico-fumes-fema-deliberates-over-remote-hospital/?utm_term=.e959d1ac54d8.

¹⁴ Id.

¹⁵ Id.

understand the steps that FEMA is taking to ensure that Vieques residents have access to a working hospital, we request answers to the following questions no later than June 5, 2019:

1. Please provide an overview of all aid that FEMA has provided the people of Vieques and their hospital since Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico on September 20, 2017.
2. According to the Washington Post, an August 2018 FEMA report on the hospital stated, "FEMA personnel determined that this project qualified for the FEMA 50 percent rule, or a building replacement." Please provide a copy of this August 2018 report and any other documents related to this determination.
3. According to the Washington Post, a "later report" on the Vieques hospital "found the hospital required only repairs, rather than a full reconstruction."
 - a. Please provide copies of all FEMA reports on the Vieques hospital produced by FEMA since August 2018.
 - b. Why did FEMA alter its assessment of what aid the Vieques hospital should receive?
4. FEMA is allegedly "awaiting an evaluation" from "a separate group of experts" before making a final decision on whether the Vieques hospital should be rebuilt using federal funds.
 - a. Which "experts" is FEMA consulting to make a determination about the Vieques hospital?
 - b. When does FEMA anticipate that these experts will complete their evaluation of the hospital project?
 - c. What are the rules these experts are following in making their determination? Will their views be made public?
5. How long, on average, does it take FEMA to assess the funding needs of hospital facilities in areas impacted by hurricanes? How does FEMA's assessment of the Vieques hospital project compare to this average assessment time?

Please do not hesitate to reach out with any questions or concerns.

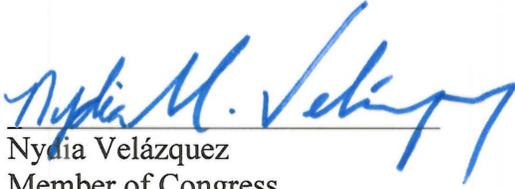
Sincerely,

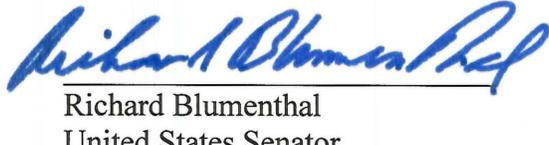


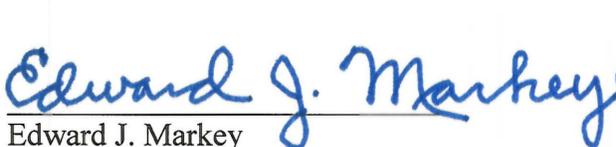
Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator

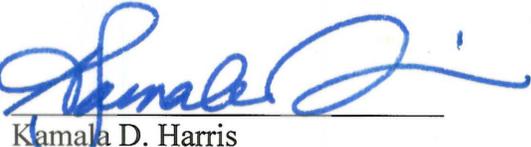


Robert Menendez
United States Senator

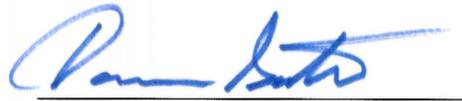

Nydia Velázquez
Member of Congress

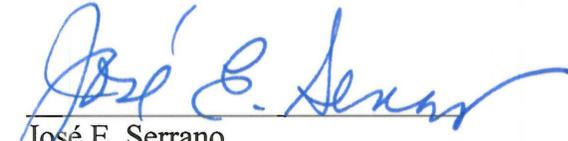

Richard Blumenthal
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Edward J. Markey
United States Senator


Kamala D. Harris
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Kirsten Gillibrand
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Darren Soto
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