



United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-0905

October 20, 2017

The Honorable Betsy DeVos
Secretary
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20202-8510

Dear Secretary DeVos,

We write with great concern for students and borrowers who have been affected by Hurricanes Irma and Maria. Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands have suffered catastrophic damages due to these storms, knocking out Puerto Rico's electric grid and leaving 3.4 million Americans with no power in the days following the storm. There are a number of concerns we must address as the island continues to recover and rebuild, including the fact that colleges and universities had to close their doors until they are able to restore functioning capacity. According to the most recent data we have received from the U.S. Department of Education ("Department"), approximately two thirds of the 246 campuses in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands are closed or have an operational status of unconfirmed. Thousands of students and families in Puerto Rico do not have access to the educational opportunities as a result of schools shutting down and many of these students have invested personal resources to build their future.

Nearly 250,000 college students have been displaced by Hurricanes Irma and Maria in the middle of their academic year and many of these students rely on federal grants and loans to pay for school. During a time of chaos and distress for colleges, universities, and the students they serve in the affected areas, we are concerned that both institutions and students will have a difficult time navigating through the complex student aid processes, such as rules governing the return of Title IV funding and subsidized loan eligibility. We urge the Department to offer critical assistance to students, as well as the colleges and universities, by expanding direct outreach to inform individuals of their options, particularly options for students and borrowers unable to complete their school year as a result of the hurricanes.

In addition, we urge you to use the statutory discretion available for you to expand the waiver of requirements for students to repay their balance of Pell Grant awards, particularly for those students who have had to temporarily discontinue their education due to the disaster affecting their institution or local community. This will bring further relief to students during this time of distress.

Nearly 10 percent of the Puerto Rico's population have federal student loans. Many of these students continue to be without power, telephone, or internet service needed to make payments on their loans or to request assistance from their student loan servicers. Unfortunately, the Department has not yet published any robust instructions for these borrowers beyond instructing them to contact their servicers, which many cannot do. Your Department has unfettered authority during a national emergency to automatically enroll borrowers into administrative forbearance and to do so without charging borrowers interest that will capitalize on their loans. We urge you to exercise your discretion to enroll borrowers impacted by Hurricane Maria in interest-free administrative forbearance for a minimum period of six months, or until Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands are no longer considered to be in a disaster zone.

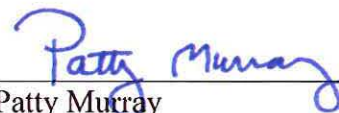
We also urge you to direct federal student loan servicers to extend or suspend deadlines for providing student loan documentation, such as annual documentation of income for the income-driven repayment plans, for impacted borrowers for as long as the law allows and until Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands are no longer considered to be in a disaster zone.

As the affected areas continue to rebuild after Hurricane Irma and Maria, we respectfully request you work closely with students and institutions in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands to ensure students have the ability to continue their education without having to worry about the stress of how they will have to pay for it. We thank you for your attention to this matter.

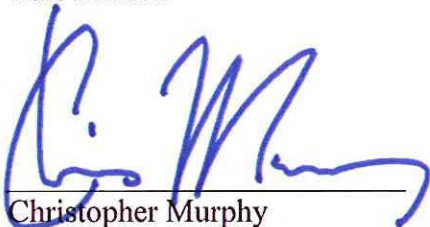
Sincerely,



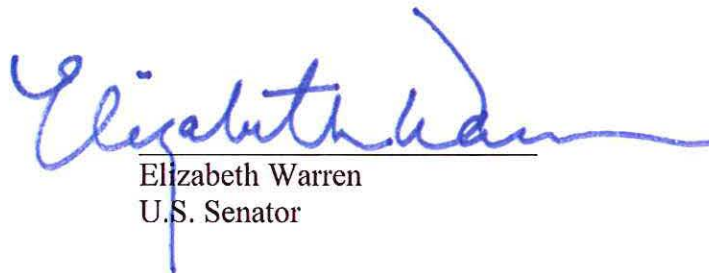
Bill Nelson
U.S. Senator



Patty Murray
U.S. Senator



Christopher Murphy
U.S. Senator



Elizabeth Warren
U.S. Senator



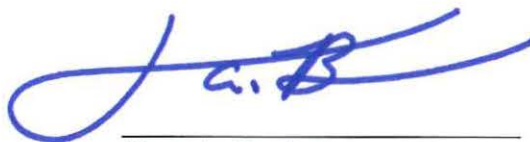
Kamala D. Harris
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Maria Cantwell
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