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.” Just weeks later, Hurricane Maria—another Category 5 storm—hit the U.S.V.I., further devastating the territory. Maria then made landfall on Puerto Rico as a Category 4 hurricane, leaving millions without power or access to clean drinking water.

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 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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higher\(^5\) 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.\(^6\) 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.\(^7\)

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.”\(^8\) Surgeon General Adams visited both territories after the hurricanes.\(^9\) In Puerto Rico, though the official fatality count due to Hurricane Maria is listed as 64, multiple reports indicate the true death toll is much higher.\(^10\) One recent study suggests that “the actual death count may be closer to 1,085,”\(^11\) while another review of mortality statistics suggests “1,052 more


people than usual died across Puerto Rico in the 42 days after the hurricane struck. Cases of waterborne diseases, like leptospirosis, have been documented in both territories, while standing water left over from flooding increased the risk of mosquito-borne illnesses. 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. The CDC has also identified rebuilding and restoring public health laboratory capacity as a critical public health challenge.

Without access to consistent electricity, Puerto Ricans' ability to maintain the quality of their medications, particularly those that require refrigeration, is limited. 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. 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. 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. Many of Puerto Rico’s hospitals still lack reliable electricity, and U.S.V.I. hospitals are limited in the services they can provide, requiring the airlifting of many patients to the mainland. 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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15 Id.
19 Id.
raising the risk of a “full-fledged mental health crisis on the island.” U.S.V.I. residents are experiencing similar challenges.

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. Though some of Puerto Rico’s 1,113 public schools have re-opened, 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. 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.

Meanwhile, the hurricanes closed dozens of college campuses and displaced hundreds of thousands of college students. And inconsistent—or nonexistent—access to electricity and Internet service complicated student borrowers’ ability to repay their student loans.

The Senate HELP Committee’s jurisdiction includes the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Education. 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’ 22

29 Id.
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,

Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator

Bill Cassidy
United States Senator

Bernard Sanders
United States Senator

Robert P. Casey, Jr.
United States Senator

Michael F. Bennet
United States Senator

Sheldon Whitehouse
United States Senator

Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator

Christopher Murphy
United States Senator

Tim Kaine
United States Senator