

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

September 14, 2018

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

Dear Secretary DeVos:

Once again, we write to you regarding our continued concerns over the U.S. Department of Education's ("Department") handling of disaster recovery aid from last year's hurricane season. More than seven months after Congress passed the *Bipartisan Budget Act* and appropriated millions of dollars in emergency funding for institutions of higher education serving students affected by Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria, the Department continues to drag its feet in getting this funding into the hands of students and communities that need assistance.

As you are aware, the Puerto Rican government's official estimate of the lives lost in Puerto Rico from these hurricanes and their aftermaths was recently revised, indicating that 2,975 individuals perished in the storms. Many communities, particularly in rural areas, continue to struggle to recover. Nevertheless, it appears the Department has only spent \$5.4 million, or just seven percent, of the \$75 million Congress appropriated in disaster aid for *displaced students* affected by the hurricanes. Of the \$100 million Congress appropriated for *directly impacted* institutions of higher education, the Department has only disbursed \$63 million, leaving nearly \$37 million of that funding left unspent.

It was Congress's intent to have this funding disbursed as quickly as possible to help affected students recover and to complete their studies. Unfortunately, it appears that the Department fails to see any sense of urgency in the matter—even as a new hurricane season has begun.

While we understand the Department continues to accept applications for all 2017 disaster aid, it has not made this apparent to potential beneficiaries. Only recently, the Department has updated its Defraying Costs of Enrolling Displaced Students (DCEDS) Program webpage to reflect an updated deadline for new submissions: October 31, 2018. However, the same has not been done for the pre-application and full application deadlines for Emergency Aid for Institutions of Higher Education (EAI) Program, which currently states the application period ended June 4, 2018, and August 1, 2018, respectively. It is our understanding that the Department has also failed to proactively notify any potential applicants that the stated deadlines are not applicable and that new deadlines have been set. If institutions do not know they can continue applying for funds, it is unlikely they would spend valuable time and resources preparing an application for submission. This is a serious failure of communication.

The Department has repeatedly ignored criticism and recommendations from members of Congress on how best to fairly and expeditiously disburse emergency aid. We believe the

application hurdles we previously identified—and which the Department ignored—have clearly resulted in the low level of applications for assistance.

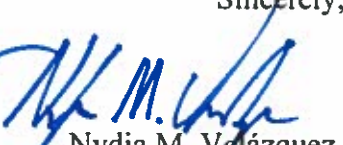
Given our concerns, which we have brought to your attention multiple times over the course of the past seven months, we would like your response to the following questions:

1. Will the Department immediately update its website for EAI funding to reflect that applications will continue to be accepted, similar to the update made to the DCEDS program webpage?
2. Has the Department denied any applications for formatting errors or other technical mistakes, and if so, how many?
 - a. If any applications were denied, did the Department allow these institutions of higher education to appeal their application's denial?
 - b. Will the Department allow any institutions of higher education that have been denied to re-apply for funding?
3. Will the Department allow any institutions of higher education that were previously awarded funding to re-apply if they have remaining need?
4. What actions will the Department take to proactively provide the necessary information and outreach directly to institutions of higher education that funds are available?
5. Has the Department experienced any other barriers in disbursing emergency aid that Congress should know of?

It is unfortunate that the Department appears to be doing only the minimum to provide funding to students and institutions of higher education impacted by last year's hurricanes. We hope that you actively work to change that perception by making recovery efforts in Puerto Rico and other impacted areas a high priority for the Department, just as you would any other state. Additionally, it is essential for the Department to act expediently in order to be able to adequately respond to storm damage that may occur during the current hurricane season. We look forward to your prompt response to the questions above.

Sincerely,


José E. Serrano
Member of Congress


Nydia M. Velázquez
Member of Congress


Kirsten Gillibrand
U.S. Senator


Elizabeth Warren
U.S. Senator


Bernard Sanders
U.S. Senator