

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-3205

September 26, 2022

The Honorable Charles E. Schumer
United States Senate Majority Leader
U.S. Capitol Building, S-221
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Patrick Leahy
Chair
Senate Committee on Appropriations
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
United States Senate Minority Leader
U.S. Capitol Building, S-230
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Richard Shelby
Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Appropriations
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Majority Leader Schumer, Minority Leader McConnell, Chair Leahy, and Ranking Member Shelby,

We write to urge Congress to pass an emergency supplemental appropriations bill to support Puerto Rico's response to Hurricane Fiona, and to request the inclusion of at least \$1 billion in Nutrition Assistance Program funding in order to continue feeding Puerto Ricans who were already suffering from high food costs and supply issues prior to the landfall of Hurricane Fiona. We urge Congress to pass emergency supplemental funding as soon as possible in order to provide disaster recovery and relief support to the people of Puerto Rico, including at least \$2.9 billion for the Disaster Relief Fund (DRF) consistent with the Biden Administration's request¹, and urge the inclusion of any funding anomalies in the upcoming Continuing Resolution required for an effective response and rebuild for Puerto Rico.

Since Fiona made landfall on Puerto Rico on September 18, 2022, there have been mudslides, floods, fallen trees, power outages, and countless other forms of municipal and personal damage, including nearly one million Puerto Ricans who have been without power, food, and water for extended periods of time. Puerto Rico is in dire need of at least \$1 billion in Nutrition Assistance Program (NAP) funding to respond to the devastation brought on by Hurricane Fiona. Puerto Ricans deserve urgent and equitable funding when faced with overwhelming circumstances such as Hurricane Fiona, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the increasing costs of food and other goods that compounded supply issues that the island was already facing. NAP applications are on the rise and it is imperative that we act now to stave off a benefits cliff as the island recovers from Hurricane Fiona. As a territory of the United States, it

¹ Office of Management and Budget, *FY 2023 Continuing Resolution (CR) Appropriations Issues* 49 (September 2, 2022), https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/CR_Package_9-2-22.pdf.

is our duty to aid them in any way we can. As American citizens, the people of Puerto Rico receive access to food and nutrition assistance under the current NAP block grant. For the past 40 years, Puerto Rico has been excluded from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), a program that allows participating states and territories to respond more effectively to the needs of their communities. Puerto Rico's NAP does not have the disaster flexibilities included in SNAP, so it is up to Congress to allocate the additional funding to the NAP block grant as the Island begins its recovery. We urge you to include at least \$1 billion of this desperately needed NAP aid.

The full scope of the damage is not entirely clear, but it is certain that Puerto Rico will need robust immediate and long-term assistance with recovery, mitigation, and developing resiliency for its critical infrastructure. Agencies such as FEMA will also need to be given flexibility, support, and oversight to ensure that recovery and reconstruction funds reach local communities to avoid previous missteps. As the latest GAO report on Puerto Rico reconstruction notes, after five years, only \$5.3 billion—or 19 percent—of the approximately \$28 billion in FEMA's Public Assistance obligations, which is the largest grant program, has been expended, as of August 2022². Our response must now reflect the lessons learned from the response to Hurricane Maria, which led to a tragic loss of human life and the exodus of more than 200,000 Puerto Ricans from the island.³

Congress has historically provided emergency supplemental funding after major natural disasters, and did so in the wake of Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Wilma in the summer of 2005, following Hurricane Sandy in 2012, and after Hurricanes Maria, Harvey, and Irma in 2017. In the wake of Hurricane Sandy, Congress and the Obama Administration moved especially quickly to provide urgent and necessary aid. We are grateful that President Biden authorized a Major Disaster Declaration for Puerto Rico and committed to cover 100% of Puerto Rico's disaster recovery costs for the next month, and that FEMA announced its own \$9.5 billion investment into Puerto Rico's crippled electrical grid prior to Hurricane Fiona.

Now, Congress must act swiftly to pass a Continuing Resolution to keep the government funded which includes any necessary funding anomalies that will contribute towards recovery and resilience. In the midst of tragedy, the United States is presented with an opportunity to make necessary resiliency improvements to Puerto Rico's critical infrastructure. Preparation and investment by Congress right now in these critical areas will help Puerto Rico recover from repeated disasters, prevent future humanitarian crises caused by hurricanes on the island, and better prepare FEMA, the Army Corps of Engineers, and other agencies to rebuild the island.

² Chris Currie, *2017 HURRICANES: Update on FEMA's Disaster Recovery Efforts in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands*, U.S. Government Accountability Office 16 (Sep. 15, 2022), <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-22-106211.pdf>

³ Nicole Acevedo, *Five years after Hurricane Maria, Puerto Rico's power crisis and a new storm revive grim memories*, NBC News (September 18, 2022), <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/puerto-rico-hurricane-mariaanniversary-power-grid-rcna47729>.

Thank you for your consideration and we look forward to continue working with you on this important matter.

Sincerely,



Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator



Bernard Sanders
United States Senator



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



Robert Menendez
United States Senator



Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator



Martin Heinrich
United States Senator