United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 20, 2018

The Honorable Brock Long
Administrator
Federal Emergency Management Agency
500 C Street S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20472

Dear Administrator Long:

We are writing to ask you to address the urgent housing needs of displaced survivors of Hurricane Maria who are currently living in our states by immediately entering into an agreement with the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to stand up the Disaster Housing Assistance Program (DHAP). Hundreds of families in our states are participating in the temporary Transitional Shelter Assistance (TSA) program run by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). This program ends in the coming weeks. By refusing to act and enter into an agreement with HUD, FEMA is putting many of these families at risk of homelessness.

Hurricane Maria caused unprecedented devastation in Puerto Rico and thousands of survivors relocated to the continental United States, including to our states. FEMA stepped in to help these displaced survivors, sheltering 7,660 at the height of the TSA program. While conditions in Puerto Rico have improved somewhat, there is still tremendous need. Recurring blackouts routinely leave huge swaths of the island in the dark. The healthcare system is still reeling, and people are unable to get medical treatments they need on the island. A number of Puerto Ricans lack the paperwork needed to show they own their homes. And many people justifiably fear that the island is unprepared for the approach of the new hurricane season. As a result, some of these survivors don't intend to return to the island. More than 2,000 people were still checked in for TSA as of April 13, including 445 in Massachusetts, 173 in New York, 127 in Connecticut, and 53 in New Jersey, but many have received notice that they must depart temporary housing in the coming days. These survivors need support in finding more permanent housing.

HUD's DHAP program is specifically designed to address the medium- and longer-term housing needs of survivors of natural disasters. DHAP provides subsidies to help families pay rent, put down a security deposit, or pay for utilities – support that is critical as they work to establish themselves in their new communities. Both Republican and Democratic presidential administrations have identified HUD as the appropriate agency to handle the long term housing needs of victims of natural disasters. It was used in response to Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Sandy. No Congressional action is required – FEMA and HUD can and should immediately begin to work together to stand up to the DHAP program.

Some have suggested that other Federal and State programs could meet the needs of these survivors, but the evidence on the ground belies this view. HUD's data show that fewer than 1 in 4 of those who are eligible receive housing assistance and, as a result, waiting lists for vouchers and other programs are years long in some of the affected jurisdictions. State-based programs, like the direct lease program, have either been unable to scale up their efforts or have strict criteria for who was eligible for assistance and cannot realistically address the need we see in our states. FEMA staff have recently informed advocacy groups that fewer than 320 households in Florida and 150 households in Texas are eligible for direct housing assistance, which falls far short of covering the full needs of affected residents.

The Puerto Rican survivors of Hurricane Maria are U.S. citizens who have experienced tremendous loss and hardship over the last year. FEMA's refusal to use the tools at its disposal, including DHAP, to help these survivors is puzzling – and profoundly troubling. I urge you to immediately reverse course and work with HUD to stand up the DHAP, to finally give these survivors permanent relief and stability.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator

Edward J. Markey
United States Senator

Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator

Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator

Robert Menendez
United States Senator