

COMMITTEE ON SMALL BUSINESS
CHAIRWOMAN

COMMITTEE ON FINANCIAL SERVICES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HOUSING AND INSURANCE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON FINANCIAL INSTITUTIONS
AND CONSUMER CREDIT

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

Washington, DC 20515

NYDIA M. VELAZQUEZ

7TH DISTRICT, NEW YORK

CONGRESSIONAL HISPANIC CAUCUS

CONGRESSIONAL CAUCUS FOR
WOMEN'S ISSUES

CONGRESSIONAL
PROGRESSIVE CAUCUS

OLDER AMERICANS CAUCUS

CONGRESSIONAL
CHILDREN'S CAUCUS

CONGRESSIONAL ASIAN
PACIFIC AMERICAN CAUCUS

September 20, 2019.

Sonny Perdue
Secretary Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington D.C. 20250

Puerto Rico Child Nutrition Program
Food and Nutrition Services
150 Federico Costa St.
San Juan, PR 00919-0759

Dear Secretary Perdue:

On the two-year anniversary of Hurricane Maria's landfall in Puerto Rico, I urge you to follow Congressional intent and initiate the study on the impact of the supplemental disaster Nutrition Assistance Program (NAP) funding on food insecurity in Puerto Rico as mandated under Public Law 116-20.

The island continues to suffer from the aftermath of that storm. Poverty levels have risen dramatically, and the economy is stagnant. As a result, we have seen an increase in the number of families and individuals who would be eligible for the Nutritional Assistance Program (NAP), if the block grant funding in Puerto Rico was not arbitrarily capped. According to the Census Bureau's American Community Survey,¹ over 43 percent of Puerto Ricans live below the poverty line compared to a national average of 14 percent. As a result, the block grant funding made available through NAP is simply incapable of meeting the needs of Puerto Ricans, particularly given the current circumstances resulting from the disaster.

In response, I championed \$5 million in appropriations to USDA to conduct an independent study, including a survey of participants, on the impact of the additional benefits on food insecurity, health status, and well-being of NAP recipients in Puerto Rico. As you are aware, this directive became section 105 of the Additional Supplemental Appropriations for Disaster Relief Act, 2019 (P.L. 116-20). Hurricanes Maria and Irma taught us some painful lessons about nutritional support in Puerto Rico. We need a comprehensive evaluation of the ongoing nutritional needs of Puerto Rico based on current demographics and income levels.

¹ Javier Balmaceda, *Without Immediate Federal Action, 1.4 Million Puerto Rico Residents Face Aid Cuts*, available at <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/without-immediate-federal-action-14-million-puerto-rico-residents-face-food-aid-cuts>

Moreover, the study should look beyond the impact of Maria and include ongoing, critical factors such as: high levels of poverty, restricted eligibility rules and local food costs. Restrictive eligibility requirements and lower benefit levels exacerbate food insecurity.² The study must explore any long-term disparities created by the capped block grant funding vs. future, potential funding at Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) levels. In addition, this study should also evaluate Puerto Rico's readiness for inclusion into SNAP including benchmarking improvements in the management and operation of the program.

We trust that your agency will follow the intent of Congress when planning and conducting this critically important study. Thank you for your attention to this issue. Please feel free to contact me directly or my staff at 202-225-2361 with any questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Nydia M. Velázquez". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Nydia" and last name "Velázquez" clearly legible.

Nydia M. Velázquez

² On the contrary: "SNAP reduces the overall prevalence of food insecurity by as much as 30 percent, and is even more effective among the most vulnerable, such as children and those with "very low food security," that is, when one or more household members have to skip meals or otherwise eat less during the year due to lack of money. The largest and most rigorous examination of the relationship between SNAP participation and food security found that food insecurity among children fell by roughly a third after their families received SNAP benefits for six months.", Steven Carlson and Brynne Keith-Jennings, *Snap is linked with Improved Nutritional Outcomes and lower Health Care Cost*, available at <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/snap-is-linked-with-improved-nutritional-outcomes-and-lower-health-care>