

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

April 2, 2020

Vice President Mike Pence
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Vice President Pence:

We write to you in your capacity as head of the White House Task Force on Coronavirus¹ in regard to the existing economic and public health vulnerabilities of Puerto Rico and the anticipated effects of the 2019 novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19). Because of the ongoing impacts of Hurricanes Irma and Maria, and a more recent earthquake swarm, the island was already struggling before the COVID-19 outbreak with economic uncertainty and a medical and public health infrastructure that had not yet been fully rebuilt. As the COVID-19 pandemic hits Puerto Rico, these economic and public health risks will grow and risk exacerbating the crisis. To mitigate this risk, we are seeking information about active steps the Trump administration is taking to support the well-being and livelihoods of Puerto Rico's residents.

Even before the devastation caused by Hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017, and the earthquakes of 2019–2020, Puerto Rico suffered from a debt crisis. The island's over \$70 billion debt,² and the inadequate federal government response to the disasters,³ has complicated recovery from the 2017 hurricanes, and we remain concerned that the island's financial situation and insufficient federal resources will severely limit Puerto Rico's ability to deal with the expected economic and public health consequences of COVID-19.

¹ USA TODAY, "Trump puts Vice President Mike Pence in charge of coronavirus response, says nation is 'very ready,'" Michael Collins and John Fritze, February 27, 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2020/02/26/coronavirus-trump-speak-reporters-he-battles-democrats/4879117002/>.

² NPR, "How Puerto Rico's Debt Created A Perfect Storm Before The Storm," Laura Sullivan, May 2, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/05/02/607032585/how-puerto-ricos-debt-created-a-perfect-storm-before-the-storm>; Washington Post, "Puerto Rico, with \$73 billion in debt, forced toward bankruptcy," Thomas Heath and Tory Newmyer, May 3, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/puerto-rico-with-73-billion-in-debt-forced-toward-bankruptcy/2017/05/03/92e39d76-3020-11e7-9534-00e4656c22aa_story.html.

³ Washington Post, "Puerto Rico faces food-stamp crisis as Trump privately vents about federal aid to Hurricane Maria-battered island," Jeff Stein and Josh Dawsey, March 25, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/puerto-rico-faces-food-stamps-crisis-as-trump-privately-vents-about-federal-aid-to-hurricane-maria-battered-island/2019/03/25/ade500fe-4cb3-11e9-b79a-961983b7e0cd_story.html.

The federal government's failure to respond adequately to the 2017 hurricanes has been well-documented.⁴ An internal Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) report found that, "[FEMA] failed to properly prepare for [the 2017] hurricane season and was unable to provide adequate support to hurricane victims in Puerto Rico."⁵ The FEMA report notably recognized that the agency "entered the [2017] hurricane season with a force strength less than its target, resulting in staffing shortages" and that the agency "experienced challenges in comprehensively tracking resources moving across multiple modes of transportation to Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands."⁶ Press reports also demonstrate that the federal government has failed to disburse all of the aid promised after Hurricane Maria to help the island recover.⁷ As of November 2019, the federal government has only "disbursed about \$14 billion in aid to Puerto Rico, out of an estimated \$91 billion that will be needed over the next two decades."⁸

Additionally, Puerto Rico has experienced more than 300 earthquakes since December 28, 2019,⁹ ten of which were large enough to damage the island's infrastructure. This includes a 6.4 magnitude earthquake on January 7, 2020, that killed at least one person and damaged homes, schools, and power plants. The earthquakes are estimated to have caused \$110 million in damage and affected at least 559 structures.¹⁰

The administration, however, has failed to provide Puerto Rico with the resources needed to support a full and timely recovery, despite instructions to do so by Congress. Since September 2017, Congress has made three separate appropriations for Community Development Block Grants Disaster Recovery Program (CDBG-DR) funds totaling nearly \$20 billion for Puerto Rico, but only \$1.5 billion of that money has reached the island,¹¹ and the island has experienced unusually long, potentially illegal, delays in getting access to appropriated funds.¹² Even when the administration has made the congressionally-mandated funds available to Puerto Rico, it has

⁴ New York Times, "'Scarier' Than Hurricane Maria: A Deadly Earthquake Terrifies Puerto Rico," Edmy Ayala, Patricia Mazzei, Frances Robles, and Sandra Garcia, January 7, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/07/us/puerto-rico-earthquake.html>.

⁵ NPR, "FEMA Report Acknowledges Failures In Puerto Rico Disaster Response," Laura Sullivan and Emma Schwartz, July 13, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/07/13/628861808/fema-report-acknowledges-failures-in-puerto-rico-disaster-response>.

⁶ Federal Emergency Management Agency, "2017 Hurricane Season FEMA After-Action Report," July 12, 2018, <https://www.fema.gov/media-library-data/1531743865541-d16794d43d3082544435e1471da07880/2017FEMAHurricaneAAR.pdf>.

⁷ New York Times, "FEMA's Hurricane Aid to Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands Has Stalled," Mark Walker and Zolan Kanno-Youngs, November 27, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/27/us/politics/fema-hurricane-aid-puerto-rico-virgin-islands.html>.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ U.S. Geological Survey, "As Aftershocks Continue in Puerto Rico, USGS Supports Quake Recovery," January 17, 2020, <https://www.usgs.gov/news/aftershocks-continue-puerto-rico-usgs-supports-quake-recovery>.

¹⁰ New York Times, "'Too Much': Dread Fills Puerto Ricans as New Earthquake Stuns Island," Patricia Mazzei, January 11, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/11/us/puerto-rico-earthquake-inspections-aid.html>.

¹¹ New York Times, "Trump Attaches Severe Restrictions to Puerto Rico's Long-Delayed Disaster Aid," Lola Fadulu and Mark Walker, January 15, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/15/us/politics/trump-puerto-rico-disaster-aid.html>.

¹² Office of U.S. Senator Elizabeth Warren, "Warren, Colleagues Seek Probe into Whether Trump Administration's Delay of Puerto Rico Disaster Recovery Funds Violated Same Law as Delay of Ukraine Security Aid," February 11, 2020, <https://www.warren.senate.gov/oversight/letters/warren-colleagues-seek-probe-into-whether-trump-administrations-delay-of-puerto-rico-disaster-recovery-funds-violated-same-law-as-delay-of-ukraine-security-aid>.

worked to impose severe restrictions on the funding, including actions to prevent certain recovery aid from going towards the island’s electrical grid and suspending the minimum wage for federal relief efforts.¹³ These delays have impeded Puerto Rico’s infrastructure and economic recovery, making residents even more vulnerable to the impending consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. In February 2020, the House of Representatives passed an emergency supplemental appropriations bill to aid Puerto Rico,¹⁴ but the White House has issued a statement of policy that “strongly opposes” this relief and announced its recommendation that President Trump veto it.¹⁵

We are deeply concerned about Puerto Rico’s health care workforce and its readiness to respond to future growth of the outbreak on the island. Currently, about 1.7 million people in Puerto Rico, more than half of the island’s estimated population, live in Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSA) for primary care.¹⁶ According to the U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), these areas are so understaffed by physicians that less than 2% of the areas’ needs are met.¹⁷ Additionally, Puerto Rico’s primary care workforce is, on average, older than the same workforce nationwide, and the primary physician workforce of the island is leaving Puerto Rico faster than they are being replaced.¹⁸

Existing economic factors, including Puerto Rico’s current GDP growth rate and its higher than average unemployment rate,¹⁹ also suggest Puerto Rico’s economy is particularly vulnerable to further downturns spurred by COVID-19 response efforts. With the government of Puerto Rico taking steps to halt the spread of coronavirus, including orders for most businesses to close,²⁰ the island’s travel and tourism industry—about 7% of Puerto Rico’s GDP²¹—will be

¹³ New York Times, “Trump Attaches Severe Restrictions to Puerto Rico’s Long-Delayed Disaster Aid,” Lola Fadulu and Mark Walker, January 15, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/15/us/politics/trump-puerto-rico-disaster-aid.html>.

¹⁴ H.R. 5687, Emergency Supplemental Appropriations for Disaster Relief and Puerto Rico Disaster Tax Relief Act, 2020.

¹⁵ Office of Management and Budget, Statement of Administration Policy, “H.R. 5687 – Emergency Supplemental Appropriations for Disaster Relief and Puerto Rico Disaster Tax Relief Act, 2020,” February 5, 2020, https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/SAP_HR-5687.pdf.

¹⁶ Bureau of Health Workforce, “Designated Health Professional Shortage Areas Statistics: First Quarter of Fiscal Year 2020: Designated HPSA Quarterly Summary,” January 1, 2020, <https://data.hrsa.gov/Default/GenerateHPSAQuarterlyReport>; United States Census Bureau, “QuickFacts: Puerto Rico,” July 1, 2019, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/PR>.

¹⁷ Bureau of Health Workforce, “Designated Health Professional Shortage Areas Statistics: First Quarter of Fiscal Year 2020: Designated HPSA Quarterly Summary,” January 1, 2020, <https://data.hrsa.gov/Default/GenerateHPSAQuarterlyReport>.

¹⁸ Government Accountability Office, “DISASTER RESPONSE: HHS Should Address Deficiencies Highlighted by Recent Hurricanes in the U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico,” September 2019, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/710/701551.pdf>.

¹⁹ Forbes, “Puerto Rico’s Economy Has Been Plummeting Like A Stone,” Erik Sherman, October 18, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/eriksherman/2019/10/18/puerto-ricos-economy-has-been-plummeting-like-a-stone/#4e46becc184e>; Miami Herald, “Puerto Rico provides \$787 million in aid to fight economic collapse from coronavirus,” Jim Wyss, March 23, 2020, <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/coronavirus/article241437906.html>.

²⁰ New York Times, “Puerto Rico Orders Coronavirus Lockdown. Violators Could Be Fined.,” Edmy Ayala and Patricia Mazzei, March 15, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/15/us/coronavirus-puerto-rico.html>.

²¹ World Travel & Tourism Council, “Puerto Rico: 2019 Annual Research: Key Highlights,” Accessed March 25, 2020, <https://www.wttc.org/-/media/files/reports/economic-impact-research/countries-2019/puertorico2019.pdf>.

severely hurt, causing “an economic and fiscal impact comparable to that caused by the natural events of the past three years.”²²

As of Tuesday, April 2, 2020, there are over 315 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Puerto Rico, including 12 deaths due to COVID-19.²³ As COVID-19 continues to spread across the island, the outbreak risks infecting particularly vulnerable parts of the population. About 20% percent of Puerto Rico residents are 65 years of age or older,²⁴ and they are more likely to have pre-existing conditions,²⁵ meaning that they are high-risk for severe illness from COVID-19, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.²⁶ In addition, people in Puerto Rico are less likely to have employer-sponsored health insurance compared to the entire United States, and many more of the island’s residents rely on Medicaid.²⁷

Furthermore, Puerto Rico’s “health infrastructure has not yet fully recovered from the shock of Hurricane Maria, when insufficient power and fresh water compounded patients’ suffering even after they had been admitted to the hospital.”²⁸ The island has also not received adequate recovery assistance from the federal government. According to press reports more than a year after Hurricane Maria, “Recovery efforts have been hindered by a less than robust federal response to the emergency, with hospitals in some of the island’s hardest-hit areas still not operating at pre-storm levels.”²⁹

On the island of Vieques, in particular, more than two years after Hurricane Maria made landfall on Puerto Rico and devastated the territory, the Vieques public community health center, the only facility performing the functions of a hospital on the island-municipality, has remained closed.³⁰ Only about two months ago did FEMA approve funds to help Vieques rebuild the

²² El Nuevo Día, “Economic recovery depends on health success,” editorial, March 17, 2020, <https://www.elnuevodia.com/english/english/nota/economicrecoverydependsonhealthsuccess-2553443/>.

²³ Johns Hopkins University & Medicine, “Coronavirus COVID-19 Global Cases by Johns Hopkins CSSE,” Accessed April 2, 2020, <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>.

²⁴ Government Accountability Office, “DISASTER RESPONSE: HHS Should Address Deficiencies Highlighted by Recent Hurricanes in the U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico,” September 2019, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/710/701551.pdf>.

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19): People Who are at Higher Risk,” March 22, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/specific-groups/people-at-higher-risk.html>.

²⁷ Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, “Public Health in Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria,” Josh Michaud and Jen Kates, November 2017, <http://files.kff.org/attachment/Issue-Brief-Public-Health-in-Puerto-Rico-after-Hurricane-Maria>.

²⁸ Grist, “Puerto Rico faces another disaster: The coronavirus pandemic,” Rachel Ramirez, March 20, 2020, <https://grist.org/justice/puerto-rico-faces-another-disaster-the-coronavirus-pandemic/>.

²⁹ Modern Healthcare, “Puerto Rico’s slow recovery leaves health system exposed for next major storm,” Steven Ross Johnson, September 8, 2018, <https://www.modernhealthcare.com/article/20180908/NEWS/180909959/puerto-rico-s-slow-recovery-leaves-health-system-exposed-for-next-major-storm>.

³⁰ New York Times, “FEMA’s Hurricane Aid to Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands Has Stalled,” Mark Walker and Zolan Kanno-Youngs, November 27, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/27/us/politics/fema-hurricane-aid-puerto-rico-virgin-islands.html>.

facility, after 13-year-old Jaideliz Moreno Ventura died after the island “lack[ed] proper medical equipment and facilities in Vieques, where she lived, to treat flu-like symptoms.”³¹

While the government of Puerto Rico has taken steps to contain the spread of COVID-19,³² we are concerned that the Trump administration’s actions to delay and impede the island’s economic and health care disaster recovery will result in further grave harm to the island’s residents amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the pandemic and its effects continue to test the economic and health care systems around the world, we are deeply concerned about the extent to which Puerto Rico’s existing economic, infrastructure, and public health gaps will exacerbate its impacts. In order to address these concerns, we ask that you provide answers to the following questions no later than Friday, April 17, 2020:

1. How will administration officials ensure that individuals and businesses in Puerto Rico receive the benefits and assistance to which they are entitled under the *Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act*?³³
 - a. Have you assessed the extent to which the lack of sufficient recovery from the natural disasters in recent years, including Hurricanes Maria and Irma and the 2019-2020 earthquakes, may hinder the delivery of this economic and health assistance, and if so, how will you address these unique challenges?
2. Please explain how the administration plans to ensure that economic and health assistance related to COVID-19 will be disbursed on an equitable and timely basis.
3. Given Puerto Rico’s existing gaps in health care infrastructure and personnel compared to the United States as a whole, how will the Trump administration ensure that the island has sufficient resources to meet the health needs related to COVID-19?
 - a. What steps will the Trump administration take to convert or construct medical facilities throughout Puerto Rico, given fears that hospitals will be overwhelmed by an influx of confirmed or presumed cases of COVID-19?³⁴
 - b. What steps will the Trump administration take to bolster and support Puerto Rico’s health care workforce?

³¹ NBC News, “FEMA approves funds to rebuild hospital in Puerto Rico after teen’s death,” Nicole Acevedo and Gabe Gutierrez, January 21, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/fema-approves-funds-rebuild-hospital-puerto-rico-after-teen-s-n1119741>.

³² NBC News, “Puerto Ricans are vigilant as coronavirus response, hurricane recovery coincide,” Nicole Acevedo, March 24, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/puerto-ricans-are-vigilant-coronavirus-response-hurricane-recovery-coincide-n1167746>.

³³ Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, Public Law 116-136.

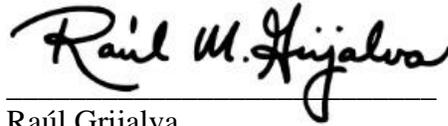
³⁴ NPR, “Coronavirus: Over 1,000 Cases Now In U.S., And ‘It’s Going To Get Worse,’ Fauci Says,” Bill Chappell, March 11, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/03/11/814460233/coronavirus-1-000-cases-now-in-u-s-and-it-s-going-to-get-worse-fauci-says>.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. We look forward to your response.

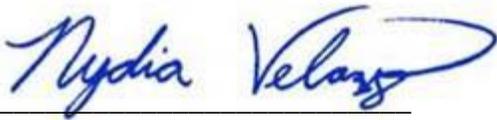
Sincerely,



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



Raúl Grijalva
Member of Congress



Nydia Velázquez
Member of Congress



Joaquin Castro
Member of Congress

CC:

Dr. Anthony S. Fauci
Director
National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases
5601 Fishers Lane
Bethesda, MD 20892