

# Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

December 13, 2017

Mr. Gene L. Dodaro  
Comptroller General  
U.S. Government Accountability Office  
441 G Street N.W.  
Washington D.C. 20548

Dear Comptroller General:

As you may be aware, there have been repeated media reports suggesting that the official count of deaths in Puerto Rico stemming from Hurricane Maria has been artificially suppressed. In early October, [Vox.com](http://www.vox.com) surveyed death reports from other media outlets, suggesting that the death count was likely significantly higher than the then-recorded official count of 45 deaths and likely underrepresented the number of fatalities resulting from the hurricane.<sup>1</sup>

In early October, we wrote to the Department of Homeland Security asking for an audit examining how Puerto Rico's fatalities are being compiled and whether that process is sufficient to accurately assess human loss of life on the Island. On December 6, we received a response from Administrator Brock Long stating that "Neither the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) nor the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has a role in cause and manner of death determination."

Nonetheless, concerns remain that the death toll from Maria is much higher than is being officially acknowledged. This past Friday, *The New York Times* published an analysis that strongly suggests the official death count in Puerto Rico likely vastly understates the number of fatalities that can be credibly linked to Maria. While the official death toll as of Friday stood at 64, the *Times*' analysis found that since the hurricane made landfall on September 20<sup>th</sup>, 1,052 more people died than compared to the average number of deaths from the same period over the previous two years.<sup>2</sup> The Center for Investigative Journalism performed a similar breakdown and determined that in the months of September and October (following Maria), 985 more people died compared to the same period in 2016.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Eliza Barclay and Alexia Fernández Campbell, "Everything that's been reported about deaths in Puerto Rico is at odds with the official count," *Vox*, Oct. 11, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/science-and-health/2017/10/11/16424356/puerto-rico-official-hurricane-maria-death-toll>

<sup>2</sup> Frances Robles, Kenan Davis, Sheri Fink and Sarah Almukhtar, "Official Death Toll in Puerto Rico: 64. Actual Deaths May Be 1,052", *New York Times*, Dec. 9, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/12/08/us/puerto-rico-hurricane-maria-death-toll.html>

<sup>3</sup> Omayra Sosa Pascual and Julio Ricardo Varela, "Nearly 1,000 people Died in Puerto Rico After Hurricane Maria", *LatinoUSA*, Dec. 7, 2017, <http://latinousa.org/2017/12/07/nearly-1000-people-died-puerto-rico-hurricane-maria/>

These analyses strongly suggest that the existing official death count strains credibility and may be misleading Americans about the severity of Maria's human toll. In coming weeks, as Congress considers additional aid for hurricane-impacted areas, including Puerto Rico, the official death count will likely shape the scope and direction of federal assistance. Already, in October, we heard President Trump himself minimize the severity of the crisis by citing the official death count.<sup>4</sup> It is therefore critical that the American people and their elected officials have an accurate accounting of the loss of life incurred from Maria.

To that end, we ask the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to undertake a review of the official death count in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, to include:

1. An audit of Puerto Rico's death toll methodology;
2. An explanation of whether GAO believes with any confidence that the official death count offered by the Puerto Rican government reflects the death toll on the Island from Maria;
3. An evaluation of why this methodology is or is not sufficient in accurately examining deaths from natural disasters;
4. An explanation of how Puerto Rico's procedures in this area differ from other states or localities;
5. A summary of the most widely used methods for determining death counts by all states and localities in the U.S.; and
6. Recommendations for improving this process in Puerto Rico and providing uniformity for death counts during future disasters in other states and localities.

The official death count will have significant public policy implications in terms of Congress' political will to appropriate additional assistance and the pace and efficacy of the Administration's ongoing recovery efforts. To that end, we ask GAO to swiftly dedicate resources to examining this problem and respond to our inquiry as quickly as possible.

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,



Nydia M. Velázquez  
Member of Congress



Bennie G. Thompson  
Member of Congress

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<sup>4</sup> Kaitlan Collins, "Trump Contrast Puerto Rico Death Toll to a 'Real Catastrophe like Katrina'", CNN Politics, Oct. 3, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/10/03/politics/trump-puerto-rico-katrina-deaths/index.html>