

# Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

October 12, 2017

The Honorable Elaine C. Duke  
Acting Secretary  
U.S. Department of Homeland Security  
Washington, DC 20528

Dear Acting Secretary Duke:

We are writing with profound concern that Puerto Rico's official death toll is being woefully underreported. Despite statements from the Administration praising the response efforts by Federal officials, accounts from individuals on the ground and media reports suggest casualty counts are much higher than being officially reported and are therefore distorting the grim realities facing the Island.

Recent stories have detailed more than 450 people who died in the wake of Maria, yet only 45 of these deaths appear to be accounted for in official government reports.<sup>1</sup> While it is unclear how many of these casualties are directly attributable to Maria, these numbers call into question the veracity of official governmental death counts. Federal and local agencies need complete transparency from all entities working on this unraveling humanitarian crisis. For all levels of government to provide an appropriate response, we cannot allow the devastation that Hurricane Maria inflicted and the dire circumstances still existing three weeks since the Hurricane made landfall to be obfuscated.

It would be morally reprehensible to intentionally underreport the true death toll to portray relief efforts as more successful than they are. If, on the contrary, this information has benignly been muddled due to a lack of capacity on the island, then the Federal government must work hand in hand with Puerto Rico's government to provide a clearer assessment.

To this end, we are requesting that your agency provide urgent oversight to the vital statistics being reported out of Puerto Rico in the wake of Hurricane Maria. The American people and their elected officials need a full, fair and accurate portrayal of the situation unfolding in the Island. We would therefore respectfully request that the Department of Homeland Security:

- Examine all casualty estimates being provided by any Federal agency and local authorities in Puerto Rico;

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.vox.com/science-and-health/2017/10/11/16424356/puerto-rico-official-hurricane-maria-death-toll>

- Evaluate whether these counts are accurate and whether the methodology being employed is sufficient; and
- Report these findings back to Congress within 10 business days.

Given the severity of the situation unfolding in Puerto Rico, it is important that Congress have a full accounting of the facts. We thank you in advance for your swift consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

  
Nydia M. Velázquez  
Member of Congress

  
Bennie Thompson  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Homeland Security