

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

February 5, 2019

Senator Richard Shelby
Chairman, Senate Committee
on Appropriations
Washington, DC 20510

Senator Patrick Leahy
Vice Chairman, Senate Committee
on Appropriations
Washington, DC 20510

Congresswoman Nita Lowey
Chairwoman, House Committee
on Appropriations
Washington, DC 20515

Congresswoman Kay Granger
Ranking Member, House Committee
on Appropriations
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Shelby, Vice Chairman Leahy, Chairwoman Lowey, and Ranking Member Granger:

As you consider fiscal year (FY) 2019 appropriations and supplemental funding, we write to express the importance of including disaster relief funding for Puerto Rico in any supplemental disaster assistance package. Recent reports indicate that as aid to Puerto Rico quickly runs out, the White House is opposing any additional funds for the territory.¹ Given the humanitarian crisis that Puerto Ricans continue to face,² we urge the Senate and House appropriations committees to ensure that any disaster assistance package prepared for consideration by Congress include food assistance funding, community redevelopment funding, and clean water grants for Puerto Rico.

In October 2018, President Trump, without any factual basis for his claim, accused Puerto Rico of attempting to use the disaster aid the territory had previously received to pay off its debts.³ The administration has stated that the president “would not tolerate anything more for Puerto Rico,”⁴ claiming that providing additional disaster funding to Puerto Rico is “excessive and unnecessary[.]”⁵ This claim could not be further from the truth. Puerto Rico is in dire need of additional disaster funding as it continues to recover from hurricanes Irma and Maria. Food assistance funding, community redevelopment funding, and clean water grants will allow Puerto Rico to continue rebuilding and strengthening the territory to make it more resilient to future storms.⁶

¹ David Rogers, *Trump White House Stonewalls as Puerto Rico Aid Runs Dry*, POLITICO (January 26, 2019), <https://www.politico.com/story/2019/01/26/puerto-rico-hurricane-aid-1125530>.

² Bethany Hines and Christopher Dawson, *One Year Later – Puerto Rico Still Needs Our Help*, CNN (September 18, 2018), <https://www.cnn.com/2017/09/21/world/iyw-help-victims-of-hurricane-maria/index.html>.

³ Rogers, *supra* note 1.

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ Executive Office of The President, *Statement of Administration Policy: H.R. 268 – Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2019* (January 16, 2019).

⁶ Rogers, *supra* note 1.

Specifically, we're asking for \$600 million in food assistance funding through the Nutrition Assistance Program will increase food security for Puerto Rican families in need.⁷ Without this additional funding, Puerto Rico will be forced to cut benefits and 140,000 people could lose nutrition assistance by the end of March.⁸ Additionally, community redevelopment funding through the Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) disaster recovery assistance program would provide Puerto Rico with grants to rebuild and repair its housing and infrastructure that have been devastated by natural disasters.⁹ Puerto Rico was previously appropriated nearly twenty billion dollars in HUD disaster relief funds, of which a fraction has reached the island, only adding to their need.¹⁰ Additionally, clean water grants through the Environmental Protection Agency would allow Puerto Rico to repair its damaged reservoirs and water pumps—ensuring that Puerto Ricans have access to safe, drinkable water.¹¹

Any supplemental disaster package should also make Puerto Rico's federal cost share under the Stafford Act 100 percent for debris removal and emergency protective measures for power, water, and sewer systems to assist with the unprecedented recovery the territory is undertaking. Finally, any agreement should continue to allow FEMA to waive the prior-condition limitation for public assistance awards so that necessary improvements are made to outdated and hurricane-damaged infrastructure.

The aid that Puerto Ricans need right now is too important to get caught up in political considerations. As U.S. citizens, Puerto Ricans deserve equal treatment when it comes to federal assistance. Please keep the recovery needs of Puerto Rico in mind when making decisions regarding any FY 2019 supplemental disaster funding.

Sincerely,



Catherine Cortez Masto



Robert Menendez

⁷ Nidhi Prakash, *The White House Called the Food Stamp Funding That Puerto Rico Requested "Excessive and Unnecessary"*, BUZZFEED NEWS (January 17, 2019), <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/nidhiprakash/trump-food-stamps-puerto-rico-shutdown>.

⁸ Rogers, *supra* note 1.

⁹ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, *Community Development Block Grants*, <https://www.hud.gov/hudprograms/disaster-recovery>.

¹⁰ Tracy Jan, et. al, *After Butting Heads with Trump Administration, Top HUD Official Departs Agency*, THE WASHINGTON POST (January 16, 2019), https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/top-hud-officials-departure-follows-disagreements-over-housing-policy-and-puerto-rico-disaster-funds/2019/01/16/e6ba5be4-1839-11e9-9ebf-c5fed1b7a081_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.ff8e4254fcc7.

¹¹ Rebecca Hersher, *Puerto Rico's Tap Water Often Goes Untested, Raising Fears About Lead Contamination*, NPR (September 20 2018), <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2018/09/20/645625805/puerto-ricos-tap-water-often-goes-untested-raising-fears-about-lead-contaminatio>.