

January 23, 2018

Senator Lamar Alexander
Chairman
Senator Patty Murray
Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
428 Senate Dirksen Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Alexander and Ranking Member Murray,

The undersigned organizations strongly support the bipartisan [request](#) for the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee to hold hearings to assess and address the ongoing education and health crisis in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands from the destructive hurricanes Irma and Maria.

It has been well over 100 days since the hurricanes made landfall, and American citizens are still struggling to regain basic living essentials. While some progress has been made, the U.S. territories are not only in recovery mode, their citizens are fighting to survive.

As we all witnessed in September, the U.S. Virgin Islands were hit with two Category 5 hurricanes over 12 days, with the second hurricane also making landfall as a Category 4 in Puerto Rico. Families still live in destroyed homes with blue tarps as partial, temporary roofing, while others are living in shelters and many have left the islands for the mainland. In Puerto Rico, schools and an unknown number of businesses are still closed, hospitals are still not fully functioning, and there are still long lines for water and ice.¹ At the end of 2017, Gov. Ricardo Rossello stated that more than 660,000 Puerto Ricans were living without power, which is estimated to be 45 percent of the island's 1.5 million electricity customers. Based on U.S. Army Corps of Engineers estimates, full power restoration for Puerto Rico could take until May, right before the hurricane season of 2018 is set to begin.² In the U.S. Virgin Islands, it is estimated that half the electric customers remain without power, about one-quarter of the territory is without cellphone service, and thousands of homes, businesses and other buildings were damaged or destroyed.³

Progress toward recovery for health and education systems is slow-moving, especially without the basic infrastructure of safe water and electricity, without access to food and safe housing, and with hazards such as long-standing water, diseases and infections. Some groups, such as individuals with disabilities, are especially vulnerable. In the U.S. Virgin Islands, nine schools were completely destroyed. Due to the significant damage to the hospitals, all patients are still being medevacked to the mainland.⁴ Puerto Rico has reopened 1,100 of the nearly 1,200 schools, with 38 being closed for structural damage, serving

¹<https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/puerto-rico-crisis/anger-grows-hope-fades-puerto-rico-s-ground-zero-remains-n833421>

²<https://qz.com/1169714/hurricane-maria-half-of-puerto-rico-still-doesnt-have-power/>

³http://www.tampabay.com/news/world/Recovering-what-was-lost-in-the-U-S-Virgin-Islands-one-boat-at-a-time_163722489

⁴<https://www.marketplace.org/2017/12/28/economy/rebuilding-plays-major-role-recovery-us-virgin-islands>

approximately 331,000 students. Many of these schools opened without access to power.⁵ Higher education institutions on the islands are similarly struggling to recover and serve students. Puerto Rico's largest hospital only has one of the five floors operational due to damage. As the process continues at its slow pace, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands are losing medical personnel, educators and families from the territories.

A focus of 2018 needs to be about rebuilding Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, but we need to ensure the Americans living there are safe and have the resources for basic living essentials. Families, individuals and businesses want to begin to be able to rebuild, have a safe home, go to work and school, and have access to safe drinking water and a doctor when they become ill. The Americans of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands desperately need help, and having access to public education and healthcare is essential to the recovery.

We ask for your committee to begin hearings on these issues immediately so that the full range of needs can be met for every U.S. citizen affected by hurricanes Irma and Maria. Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

AASA
Action Ridge
AFSCME
AIDS United
All God's Children Metropolitan Community Church
Alliance for Excellent Education
Alliance for Retired Americans
Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU)
American Association of People with Disabilities
American Federation of School Administrators
American Federation of Teachers
American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee
Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance, AFL-CIO
Asociacion de Maestros de Puerto Rico (AMPR)
ASPIRA Association
Association of Flight Attendants - CWA
Association of University Centers on Disabilities
AUCD
Augustana Lutheran Church of Hyde Park
Augustus F. Hawkins Foundation
Autistic Self Advocacy Network
Benedictine Sisters of Baltimore
Benedictine Sisters of Chicago
Benedictine Sisters of Virginia
Berkeley Friends Church
Boricua Vota

⁵http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/2017/12/puerto_rico_schools_reopened_enrollment_dropped.html

Carter-McGowan Services, LLC
Catholic Charities of Buffalo
Catholic Charities of Chicago
Center for American Progress
Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP)
Center for Popular Democracy
Chicago Teachers Union
Citizens Education Project
Coalition on Human Needs
coasap
Coastal Bend Center for Independent Living
Collaborative Center for Justice
Communications Workers of America (CWA)
Community Action Committee of the Lehigh Valley
Community Resource Exchange
CWA Local 1082
D.C. Hunger Solutions
Dedham Junior Women's Club
Delaware Ecumenical Council on Children and Families
DEMOCRATS ABOARD
Democrats for Education Reform
Department for Professional Employees, AFL-CIO
Doctors for America
Dominican Sisters ~ Grand Rapids
Earthjustice
Ebenezer Baptist Church
EDGE Consulting LLC
Education Law Center
Education Rights Network
Emmanuel United Presbyterian Church
Erie Benedictines for Peace
Faith Organizing Alliance
Families USA
Florida Alliance of CDCs
Food For All
Franciscan Sisters of the Poor
Friends of the Earth
Frontier Nursing University
Gamaliel Network
Generation Progress
Global Alliance Interfaith Networks
Global Justice Institute
GLSEN
Grace Lutheran Church
Grand St Settlement
Greater Miami Service Corps
Greater New York Labor Religion Coalition
Hawaii Public Charter Schools Network

HEAL-ONLINE.ORG (HEAL)
Hedge Clippers
Hip Hop Caucus
Hispanic Alliance, inc.
Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU)
Hispanic Federation
Illinois Association of Multilingual Multicultural Education
Iniciativa Acción Puertorriqueña
Integrated Community Solutions
Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA)
International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers
International Federation of Professional & Technical Engineers (IFPTE)
Journey for Justice Alliance
Justice in Aging
Justice Now!
KS CHAPTER OF NAN
LCLAA
League of United Latin American Citizens
Learning Forward
LORETTO COMMUNITY
Make the Road CT
MamásConPoder
Maritime Trades Department, AFL-CIO
Maryland United for Peace and Justice
MEBA
Metropolitan Community Churches
Mi Familia Vota
MICAH- Metropolitan Interfaith Council on Affordable Housing
Michigan Unitarian Universalist Social Justice Network
MomsRising
Morgan State University
Mt. Carmel Missionary Baptist Church
Musikanten Montana
NAACP
NAACP Lake-Newaygo Branch 3144
NABSE
National Alliance for Partnerships in Equity (NAPE)
National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE)
National Alliance of Black School Educators (NABSE)
National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education (NAFEO)
National Association for Multicultural Education
National Association of Bilingual Education
National Association of Councils on Developmental Disabilities
National Association of Secondary School Principals
National Association of Social Workers
National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE)
National Black Justice Coalition
National Center for Learning Disabilities

National Center for Lesbian Rights
National Consumer Law Center
National Council for Languages and International Studies
National Council of Gray Panthers Networks
National Council of Jewish Women
National Domestic Violence Hotline
National Education Association
National Federation of Federal Employees
National Hispanic Caucus of State Legislators
National Hispanic Foundation for the Arts
National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health
National LGBTQ Task Force Action Fund
National Migrant Seasonal Head Start Association (NMSHSA)
National Network to End Domestic Violence
National Organization for Women
National PTA
National Puerto Rican Agenda
National School Boards Association
National Urban League
National WIC Association
New Jersey Association of Mental Health and Addiction Agencies, Inc.
New York Communities for Change
Office of Community Empowerment and Opportunity
OPKC
Our Spring Lake Store LLC
Oxfam
Peace X Peace Women's Group
Pennsylvania Council of Churches
Pennsylvania Interfaith Impact Network
Phelps
PHENOM (Public Higher Education Network of Massachusetts)
PIIN
Pittsburgh LCLAA
Pittsburgh Theological Seminary
Population Connection Action Fund
Pride at Work
Public Health
Public Justice Center
Puerto Rico Equality Forum
Puerto Rico Institute on Developmental Disabilities (PR-UCEDD)
Schott Foundation
Seafarers International Union
Service Employees International Union
Sisters of Mercy
Sisters of Mercy West Midwest Community Justice Team
Sisters of St Francis
Sisters of St. Dominic of Blauvelt, NY
Sisters of St. Joseph

SocioEnergetics Foundation
TASH
Teaching for Change
The Allin Congregational Church, UCC
The Arc of the United States
The Badass Teachers Association, Inc.
The Bingham Program
The Joint National Committee for Languages
The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights
Toledo Area Jobs with Justice & Interfaith Worker Justice Coalition
Transportation Trades Department, AFL-CIO
UnidosUS (formerly NCLR)
Unitarian Universalist Escalating Economic Inequality Task Force - Southeast Michigan
United States Hispanic Leadership Institute
Wisconsin Council of Churches
YWCA Alliance