

RICHARD BLUMENTHAL  
CONNECTICUT

COMMITTEES:

AGING

ARMED SERVICES

COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND TRANSPORTATION

JUDICIARY

VETERANS' AFFAIRS

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

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706 HART SENATE OFFICE BUILDING  
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

(202) 224-2823  
FAX: (202) 224-9673

90 STATE HOUSE SQUARE, TENTH FLOOR  
HARTFORD, CT 06103

(860) 258-6940  
FAX: (860) 258-6958

915 LAFAYETTE BOULEVARD, SUITE 304  
BRIDGEPORT, CT 06604

(203) 330-0598  
FAX: (203) 330-0608

<http://blumenthal.senate.gov>

The Honorable Brock Long  
Administrator  
Federal Emergency Management Agency  
500 C Street SW  
Washington, DC 20472

To Administrator Long:

I write with deep concern that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has abruptly terminated numerous families in Connecticut from the Transitional Shelter Assistance (TSA) program – despite the dangerously uninhabitable condition of their homes in Puerto Rico. These families have been given mere days to find alternative arrangements or return to Puerto Rico, where they report their homes lack access to sanitary water, functional utilities and sound roofs. This is inexplicable and inexcusable and I urge you to immediately take action to meet our nation's moral obligation to these displaced American families in Connecticut and nationwide.

The TSA program is a critical lifeline for those displaced in Federally-declared disaster areas, but we are at risk of failing our fellow Americans unless minimum habitability standards are adopted. We are living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the greatest nation on earth-- access to running water, electricity and a functional roof are the bare minimum of what we must consider as habitable. The absence of these basic necessities in the FEMA habitability standard is simply unacceptable-- indeed shameful.

The concerns I've heard from families in Connecticut about FEMA's TSA program are dire and dramatic. First, FEMA relies on families to talk with the hotel staff to find out if they are continuing to be eligible for the program. Second, if notified, they often have less than a week to return to Puerto Rico or find alternate housing (some are elderly, others have children enrolled in local schools). Third if they contest or appeal the FEMA decision, they must still return to Puerto Rico or find alternate housing during the pendency of the appeal. Fourth, homes that have no running water or electricity are being declared habitable.

Thousands of displaced families have sought refuge through programs like TSA in desperate need of normalcy and security amidst chaos – to allow their children to attend school and parents the opportunity to get back on their feet. In light of this ongoing economic and humanitarian crisis, I urge you to take commonsense steps to ameliorate the suffering of displaced families by supporting long-term housing solutions for eligible families in coordination with the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). I would also urge you to

explore ways to improve the functionality and efficacy of the TSA eligibility determination process by establishing a habitability standard that explicitly requires -- at minimum -- running water, electricity and a functional roof as well as create a formal appeal process related to TSA eligibility for displaced families.

Last week, I saw firsthand the devastation that still remains throughout Puerto Rico and the lack of significant progress in bringing basic services to the residents of the island months after the hurricanes struck. I returned from that trip frustrated and furious.

In Puerto Rico, many on the island still suffer without access to electricity, clean water, and adequate housing. In fact, many communities have had 80 to 90 percent of their housing stock utterly destroyed. Meanwhile, other homes that weren't completely devastated – many of which without roofs – have yet to receive tarps to cover the structure, and, as of December, only 26 percent of the nearly 67,000 applications for temporary roofs had been installed.<sup>1</sup>

As a result, more than 10,000 displaced Puerto Ricans are utilizing the TSA program,<sup>2</sup> including approximately 193 families in Connecticut. FEMA's guidance on TSA clearly states that the program "is intended to reduce the number of disaster survivors in congregate shelters by transitioning survivors into short-term accommodations through direct payments to lodging providers."<sup>3</sup> Therefore, FEMA must ensure that any steps to terminate families from the TSA program does not serve as a pipeline to shelters, financial ruin, or worse – homelessness.

In December 2017, FEMA agreed to extend TSA through March 20 citing "a large number of damaged homes across the island and lack of available utilities in many areas."<sup>4</sup> That extension serves as a temporary reprieve for families facing homelessness under dire winter conditions in Connecticut. The fact of the matter is that most of these families will still lack access to adequate, safe homes in March as the latest reports estimate that power may not be fully restored until the end of May.

Furthermore, as you know, the criteria for continued eligibility are set in place within the negotiated TSA extension agreement between Puerto Rico and FEMA, and are determined on a case-by-case basis. However, I remain deeply concerned over the abysmally low standards in place for determining the habitability of a home for TSA applicants, which according to FEMA staff and housing advocates, does not require homes in some instances to have consistent access to basic needs, like electricity and running water.

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<sup>1</sup> Sutter, John D. "Thousands Wait for Roofs in Puerto Rico." CNN, Cable News Network, 6 Dec. 2017, [www.cnn.com/2017/12/06/politics/puerto-rico-blue-roof-contract-invs/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2017/12/06/politics/puerto-rico-blue-roof-contract-invs/index.html).

<sup>2</sup> News, CBS. "FEMA Extends Housing Program for Puerto Ricans Displaced by Maria." CBS News, CBS Interactive, 2 Jan. 2018, [www.cbsnews.com/news/fema-extends-transitional-shelter-assistance-housing-program-for-puerto-rico-hurricane-maria/](http://www.cbsnews.com/news/fema-extends-transitional-shelter-assistance-housing-program-for-puerto-rico-hurricane-maria/).

<sup>3</sup> Fact Sheet - Transitional Shelter Assistance. Federal Emergency Management Agency, 2 Sept. 2017, [www.fema.gov/media-library/assets/documents/134529](http://www.fema.gov/media-library/assets/documents/134529).

<sup>4</sup> December 29, 2017 letter from Assistant Administrator Alex Amparo to Federal Cooperating Officer Michael Byrne and the Regional Administrator Thomas Van Essen of FEMA requesting the extension of the Transitional Sheltering Assistance (TSA) program for FEMA DR-4336-PR and FEMA DR-4339-PR. [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1zp-1x1X\\_5M6tBmGqQmdoXP7O0wP9gEYb/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1zp-1x1X_5M6tBmGqQmdoXP7O0wP9gEYb/view).

Living in a hotel for an extended period of time is simply not a solution. There should be a less expensive, more appropriate living arrangement especially for families with children, seniors and people with disabilities.

Finally, I have heard from many advocates and displaced families throughout Connecticut that describe inhumane, unworkable timeframes during the TSA termination process. This instability has forced many families to scramble to prepare an appeal or secure alternate housing with only a few days' notice. It is simply unacceptable that the federal government would subject certain groups of Americans to a lower standard of living due to forces that were completely out of their control, such as natural disaster.

Therefore, FEMA must take the following steps:

- 1.) Accept the State of Connecticut's urgent request for a two-week extension of TSA, until Monday January 29, for each of the 45 families deemed ineligible by FEMA. This reasonable request will allot the State more time to find adequate housing alternatives for families that are expected to lose their housing benefits as of this Sunday.
- 2.) Establish an Interagency Agreement (IAA) with U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to provide longer-term, more stable and appropriate housing for displaced families, such as the Disaster Housing Assistance Program. FEMA and HUD have utilized IAA after other natural disasters, like Hurricane Katrina and Superstorm Sandy.
- 3.) Extend the TSA program operation to 18 months, as allowed by statute, to minimize further trauma to survivors and their families until habitable and livable conditions are in place: clean water, consistent electricity access, accessible medical facilities and school year completions. This extension should be provided without putting an additional financial burden on Puerto Rico.
- 4.) Provide at least one month's notice of termination of TSA benefits directly to families whose homes are deemed habitable, allowing for a reasonable time to find alternative housing and eliminating the necessity for families to continually check with hotel staff on whether they continue to qualify for such benefits.
- 5.) Establish a standard of habitability that, at a minimum, requires running water, utilities and stable roof and walls.
- 6.) Create a formal appeal process for people who have their TSA benefits terminated that provides benefits during the appeal process, clear proof of structural habitability of the home and a presumption that an extension will be granted should FEMA fail to prove structural habitability.

It may take years for Puerto Rico to fully recover from the wide-spread devastation and the federal government's glacial, piece-meal recovery efforts have only added salt to the wound, and prolonged suffering for many families. You have an opportunity to provide much-needed

relief from this ongoing nightmare in the form of safe, and stable housing. I look forward to your timely response to this matter.

Sincerely,



RICHARD BLUMENTHAL

United States Senator