

July 17, 2020

Honorable Wanda Vazquez Garced
La Fortaleza
PO Box 9020082
San Juan, PR 00902-0082

Honorable Governor,

We, the undersigned members of the Disaster Housing Recovery Coalition's Puerto Rico Working Group, ask that you act in the best interest of earthquake survivors and quickly request that FEMA reopen the Individual Assistance Application process and continue to keep its Disaster Recovery Centers operational beyond their planned closing date of July 24. We also ask that your office work with FEMA to ensure that all survivors – including those with the lowest incomes – are able to access assistance offered by FEMA. The latest tremors to hit the island on July 3 demonstrate that continued attention to earthquake relief and recovery is a necessity.

The Disaster Housing Recovery Coalition, convened by the National Low Income Housing Coalition, includes over 850 national, state, and local organizations working in disaster recovery. The Disaster Housing Recovery Coalition works to ensure that federal disaster recovery efforts reach all impacted households; specifically those with the lowest incomes who are often the hardest hit by disasters and have the fewest resources to recover afterwards. The Puerto Rico Working Group is composed of organizations focused on disaster recovery in the territory of Puerto Rico and work to ensure that federal funding and local disaster assistance is provided quickly, efficiently, and transparently.

In response to the coronavirus pandemic, FEMA suspended its field operations in the territory – including activity at Disaster Recovery Centers (DRCs) – on March 16. This closure lasted for more than three months only ending when DRCs reopening on June 22. The DRCs continue to offer only in-person visits by appointment and drive-thru services for document collection. DRCs serve as vital resources to disaster survivors, providing a centralized location for disaster survivors to gain information on a variety of disaster recovery programs and eligibility requirements without the need for internet or phone service. The closure – coming just three months after a series of major earthquakes and amid numerous aftershocks in the Southern region of the island – has served to worsen existing barriers Puerto Rican disaster survivors have faced in accessing FEMA's Individual Assistance (IA) in Puerto Rico.

The latest tremors have worsened numerous previously-damaged homes - many with structural damage from January's earthquake, necessitating the update of many applications for IA assistance and creating additional need for DRC services. Furthermore, many homes damaged in the earthquakes earlier this month are located in areas not covered by the existing federal disaster declaration and are therefore, ineligible for FEMA IA assistance. FEMA must be made aware of that fact and asked to extend the geographic range of the initial disaster declaration to cover these new survivors. With the deadline for originally opening disaster assistance applications now passed – it is of pivotal importance that those individuals with active applications be provided the ability to adequately complete them.

Preliminary reviews of FEMA IA application approval data shows that over 70% of applicants have been denied assistance or had their applications marked as “incomplete.” The reason for this denial and disqualification rate can be traced to numerous ongoing issues; such as: the lack of proof of ownership, property title, legal representation, and/or lack of information – the same issues that plagued the agency’s response to Hurricanes Irma and Maria. FEMA’s continued insistence that home title documentation, or an alternative sworn statement form offered by local non-profits but not in DRCs – be submitted before proceeding with assistance evaluations have created confusion, misinformation, and have stressed the capacities of local nonprofits that are simultaneously responding to the economic fallout of a pandemic. Given the complicated application process, legal information and assistance is commonly needed by earthquake survivors. The institution of an appointment-only policy which excludes legal services groups at DRCs has prevented earthquake survivors from receiving the legal aid they need – only further exacerbating and elevating the rates of denial and disqualification.

In order to ensure that all earthquake survivors have access to the important information and resources DRCs provide – **we ask that you: 1) submit a request that FEMA continue to reopen the IA application period and operate the DRCs for 90 days; 2) request that FEMA extend the existing earthquake disaster declaration to cover areas newly damaged by the latest tremors; and 3) that your office work with FEMA to ensure that survivors are allowed access to legal aid organizations, and that they are provided with all materials needed to correctly complete an application for assistance.**

Amid the ongoing aftershocks, coronavirus pandemic, and economic recession accessing adequate disaster recovery assistance is imperative to the long-term survival of disaster survivors – including low-income households. Survivors should not also be forced to deal with needlessly complicated application processes and prematurely closed DRCs. This is not only an issue for areas such as Ponce, Guayanilla, or Guanica, but is of extreme importance for the entire island – which will continue to suffer if earthquake survivors are not able to access needed assistance.

Thank you for receiving our requests and we look forward to your response.

The Puerto Rico Working Group of the Disaster Housing Recovery Coalition includes the undersigned organizations:

AIDS Project Worcester
Ayuda Legal Puerto Rico
City & Metropolitan Planning Department, University of Utah
Firmes, Unidos y Resilientes con la Abogacía, Inc.
Fundación Fondo de Acceso a la Justicia
Hispanic Federation
National Low Income Housing Coalition
National Puerto Rican Agenda
Oxfam America
Planners for Puerto Rico