



STATEMENT
OF
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BEFORE
THE COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

**HEARING ON PREPAREDNESS, RESPONSE AND REBUILDING: LESSONS FROM THE 2017
DISASTERS**

Thank you Mr. Chairman and Ranking Minority Member Thompson for the opportunity to appear before this Committee today to share with you some of the many lessons learned from the passing of Hurricane Maria through Puerto Rico nearly six months ago.

Mr. Chairman, I appear before you as an At-Large State Representative, on behalf of the nearly 3.5 million American citizens who call Puerto Rico our home. Before I begin, I wish to extend our deepest gratitude for your dedicated support in assisting us in the process of recovery and rebuilding. In the past six months, you have maintained a watchful and empathic eye, evaluating the situation on the island firsthand with visits, and maintaining constant communications with federal and local agencies to ensure that the needs of our American citizens are met and that the normalcy we all long for is finally restored. I also want to thank you for your unconditional assistance to our sole representative in Congress, the Honorable Jenniffer González, who has demonstrated exemplary leadership as a coalitions builder to secure the necessary resources that afford these American citizens sound health, homes, and the restoration of basic needs including electricity, potable water and telecommunications, among many other items.

It has been six months since Hurricane Irma pummeled through the Caribbean, including Puerto Rico, and 176 days since Hurricane María ripped through our island. Within a span of two weeks, Puerto Rico was hit by two Category 4 and 5 hurricanes. For the past 20 years – since Hurricane Georges -- we had been spared, and up until

September of last year, we often boasted that Puerto Rico was especially blessed and protected.

And then, in just 15 days, we were humbled. On September 23, 2017 we were facing one of the worst natural disasters in modern history. It was as if Mother Nature was reminding us all that **no matter how strong one might be, nature will always be more powerful, and it deserves our utmost respect. That, Mr. Chairman and members of this committee, is our first lesson.**

Let me begin by stating that in spite of enjoying a 20-year period of relative peace during hurricane season, I can confidently state that our emergency preparedness plans have always been comprehensive and effective. For both Hurricanes Irma and María, our plan was put in place on time; allowing the state government and our first responders, as well as the mayors, to quickly evacuate residents from at-risk communities onto shelters, and for individuals and families to purchase food and supplies, and to secure their homes and businesses. When Hurricane Irma made landfall, we were ready, and we were fortunate that while it devastated certain areas in the northeast of the island, the damage caused in other parts was not severe, allowing for swift mobilization and recovery.

As far as Hurricane Irma was concerned, we were lucky, unlike our neighbors in the Eastern Caribbean. We were grateful for having been partially spared and immediately began to help our neighbors. Thousands of Puerto Ricans answered the call for help and packed their boats with tons of much-needed supplies and resources. They headed Southeast to lend a helping hand to our neighbors in the US and British Virgin Islands, St. Marteen, Antigua & Barbuda, among others.

And then, suddenly, María showed up on the map. It moved rapidly through the Atlantic, and we prepared once more and prayed that luck would be on our side again. But this time, there was no escaping the wrath. Hurricane María enveloped our entire island, and for over 12 hours, it ravaged us with fierce winds and torrential rains. In less than one day, millions of families were robbed of their most precious belongings, stripped of basic services, lost without their livelihood.

The next day, as we opened the doors of our damaged homes to try and recover from the trauma, we found ourselves without no water, no power, no communications...and just, utter devastation. As I mentioned before, our emergency preparedness plan was implemented well in advance of the storm. But, our plan did not take into account the magnitude and sheer force of this hurricane. It was put in place, but it was not enough. FEMA's plan was also ready, but it also proved inadequate. Let's be honest. None of us – either at the state or federal levels – were prepared to tackle the devastation caused by Hurricane María. **This is our second lesson: We must make the necessary adjustments to adapt our emergency preparedness and recovery efforts for more effective and efficient response in the upcoming hurricane season.**

In making adjustments to emergency preparedness plans at the federal level, a series of important items must be taken into consideration:

1. **In order to better prepare for hurricane season, the federal government must anticipate shipping delays to the island and take the necessary steps, to ensure rapid response by sea and air, including waiving or eliminating cabotage laws.**

Puerto Rico is an island. It may seem obvious, but we quickly learned that because of our distance from the mainland, urgent supplies, including water, power generators, and medical supplies took weeks to get to the island, delaying FEMA's relief efforts. Indeed, shipping delays have caused havoc in the restoration of power as outside contractors and the Corps of Engineers wait impatiently for materials and equipment to arrive.

2. **Nowadays, telecommunications are a basic necessity.** Your smartphone is no longer a luxury. It is a piece of emergency equipment that needs to function in order for the most basic of communications to flow. In Puerto Rico, we expected that we would be without power for some time after the storm. But we did not anticipate that telecommunications would be shot down entirely.

This is extremely important. I want you to picture being on a mountain after a solid 12-hour pounding of 155 miles per hour winds and over 20 inches of rain in a

house that lost its roof...has no electricity, no water, and a diabetic mother who needs dialysis. You have no landline, no WIFI, and your telecom company service is down. The road is blocked by debris, so you are unable to move from your location. You don't know if the nearest hospital is open, and you cannot call your neighbor for help. You also won't be able to reach 911 to request emergency services of any kind. I cannot stress enough how terrible is the feeling of isolation in the midst of devastation. Six months after the storm, this remains the case for many people in Puerto Rico. It is unacceptable.

The Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) announcement last week to direct \$954 million dollars toward the restoration and expansion of communications networks in Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands is welcome news. We must afford people in emergency situations access to telecommunications during and after the emergencies so that they can check in with friends and family and seek help, if needed.

3. **Cut the red tape.** Whoever thought that bureaucracy could effectively handle emergencies was sorely mistaken. It can't, despite all good intentions. Sadly, we are still suffering the consequences of inefficiencies brought on by excessive paperwork, inter and intra-agency consultation and needless requirements. Just this week, Governor Rosselló announced an initiative aimed at identifying and eliminating areas of overregulation and bureaucratic burdens. The federal government is not immune to these shortcomings. It should follow suit and eliminate red tape in order to ensure a more effective response to emergencies.
4. **There is no space for political pandering in the middle of an emergency.** I -- as well as most of the American citizens in Puerto Rico -- wholeheartedly believe that our leaders at the executive branch and here in Congress have done their best to provide for steadfast relief and recovery. You have done so because you are genuinely concerned for the wellbeing of the 3.5 million American citizens in Puerto Rico. Can we improve the way we do it? Certainly. Nobody is

perfect. This Committee hearing is testament to that, and we are immensely grateful for your consideration.

But, to use the pain and suffering of millions of American citizens to indulge in cheap politicking and gain political recognition is simply immoral. It is a shameful exploitation of people who are merely trying to recoup their normalcy in the midst of chaos. As we approach rebuilding efforts, I urge all decision makers and leaders to find common ground, set partisanship aside, and rally together for the thousands of families in Puerto Rico that deserve to rise and prosper.

5. **We must urgently invest in strengthening our power grid.** According to the Puerto Rico Power Authority (PREPA), as of Monday we had 93% power generation and 91% power consumption, meaning that over 1.3 million customers have had their power restored. In numbers, it looks as if there has been progress. It has been slow, but there has been progress.

But, let's put this in perspective. Six months after Hurricane Irma hit the island, over 130,000 people are still without power. Imagine living close to 200 days without electricity. And, less than two weeks ago, a failure in one of the main distribution lines provoked a major outage and suddenly, about 800,000 customers had lost power again. Telecommunications were shot and tensions grew high.

So, yes, there has been progress. But, we still have a long, long way to go. And, no one, absolutely no one, can be satisfied with these numbers. Just last week, hundreds of thousands of residents throughout the northeast mainland were left without power after the winter cyclone bomb, and authorities could not work fast enough to restore service.

Our system is old and fragile. Recently, US Army Corps of Engineers Lieutenant General Todd Semonite asserted that the shortage of supplies that has delayed power restoration is due in part to the age of our grid; and pointed at the fact

that some of the parts that were needed were no longer available in the market. In order to complete the work, they had to order these parts be manufactured once again just for Puerto Rico.

Sadly, the investment being made in producing these old parts and equipment is only a "band-aid." Because the system is not being modernized, it will remain just as vulnerable as it was a day before Hurricane Irma made landfall last September. Wouldn't it be better to invest taxpayers' dollars in updating the system so that it holds better during the upcoming hurricane season, which starts in just 76 days?

The recently approved relief package that was approved and signed into law included \$16 billion for Puerto Rico. The funds are badly needed as Puerto Rico simply lacks the resources – human or financial – to fortify the system and prepare for hurricane season.

The simple truth is that we need more time. We need more time, more materials, more resources. It pains me to say, we need more sense of urgency.

Our request for diligence is far from ungrateful. We are forever indebted to the thousands of federal workers from FEMA, the US Corps of Engineers, and other agencies who are working on-site. They are committed public servants who want to see our people recover, grow and prosper.

We cherish our federal workers' hard work on our behalf. We understand that they too, have been humbled by nature. We believe that by coming over, they have confronted a challenge that they never imagined.

We know that they have left their families behind to come here and look after us. We get that they miss their homes. They want to get back to normal. Just like we do.

So it is with deep respect that I ask that you, as Members of Congress, inject that much needed sense of urgency to our federal agencies. We all need to be more efficient and steadfast in our recovery efforts. We need it not just so that the people of Puerto Rico get back to normal, but so that ALL of us do.

I make this humble request on behalf of the millions of families who in the face of adversity, rose up the day after the storm to clean their houses, clear the debris from the streets, and help those most in need in their communities.

I make this request on behalf of the thousands of doctors who have continued to tend to the sick in spite of the lack of power or internet in their offices or hospitals. Many of them lost their homes, their offices were severely damaged, but that has not stopped them from caring for their patients.

I make this request on behalf of the thousands of entrepreneurs who have invested every single penny they have in the bank to save their businesses, and open their doors to the public. Some of them are chefs...others are barbers or mechanics. They rose in spite of adversity. They go to work every day hoping for normalcy, for economic recovery and salvation of their aspirations.

I make this request on behalf of the thousands of people who lost their jobs in the aftermath, but have not quit, and continue to look for work in order to get ahead.

I make this request on behalf of the thousands of kids who go to school every day, in spite of the lack of power or water. Their education continues to be more important than any obstacle.

Because you see, behind the devastation of Maria, a bigger story is being written in Puerto Rico. It is a story of resilience. It is about people who want to get ahead, who want be self-sufficient, who want to get back to normal.

With that, I thank you for your time, and hope that we can continue working together so we can build a stronger and better Puerto Rico.