

United States House of Representatives
Committee on Financial Services
Washington, D.C. 20515

June 29, 2018

William B. Long
Administrator
Federal Emergency Management Agency
U.S. Department of Homeland Security

Dear Administrator Long:

Puerto Rican families continue to struggle in the aftermath of Hurricanes Maria and Irma, which devastated the territory nine months ago. The 2018 hurricane season has already started and thousands of Puerto Ricans still do not have power. Despite the “official” count that puts the country’s death toll, as a result of Hurricane Maria, at 64, a new Harvard study estimates at least 4,645 deaths can be linked to Maria and its immediate aftermath. The staggering number of deaths is thought to be attributed in part to the slow recovery efforts and the inability of the Federal Government to appropriately prepare for the response efforts the island would need given its vulnerable state prior to the Hurricanes.

In the midst of widespread criticisms of the Trump Administration’s response to Puerto Rico, particularly as compared to other disaster-stricken areas in the continental U.S., the Governor of Puerto Rico wrote to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) on December 14, 2017, requesting that FEMA enter into an inter-agency agreement with the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to stand up a Disaster Housing Assistance Program (DHAP) that would provide temporary housing vouchers for residents in Puerto Rico in need of assistance. Many stakeholders have also advocated for DHAP, in hopes that it would resolve some of the issues with FEMA’s provision of transitional housing assistance. However, on May 15, 2018 FEMA denied Puerto Rico’s request for DHAP, and we respectfully request that FEMA provide further justification for its denial.

In its letter denying Puerto Rico’s request, FEMA questions the timeliness of DHAP, stating that it could take three to six months to implement. But by its own admission, FEMA could have stood up DHAP in Puerto Rico in the time that it took for FEMA to officially respond to Puerto Rico’s request for DHAP (approximately five months). FEMA also cites the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Office of Inspector General’s (OIG) findings that there was insufficient data on the effectiveness of DHAP. However, the lack of sufficient data collection and analysis on DHAP is FEMA’s own failure, and we can never hope to have a comprehensive evaluation of the effectiveness of a partnership with HUD to carry out transitional housing assistance unless FEMA takes steps to stand up another DHAP with adequate data collection mechanisms in place. FEMA further cites “significant administrative costs” despite the findings of the same DHS OIG report that there is insufficient data to evaluate the cost effectiveness of DHAP compared to other forms of transitional housing assistance.

FEMA goes on in its letter denying DHAP for Puerto Rico, claiming that the program is a “burden on survivors” and that survivors under DHAP would have to pay increasing amounts of rent throughout the assistance period, whereas the Direct Lease program provides survivors with rent-free units for 18 months. There is no reason why FEMA could not design a future DHAP to provide rental assistance that is more similar to the Direct Lease program. FEMA also alleges survivors are not guaranteed further housing assistance from HUD at the conclusion of DHAP assistance, but this is true of all transitional housing assistance provided by FEMA. Further, FEMA claims that DHAP is burdensome for survivors because survivors must find available rental units on their own before receiving assistance under DHAP.

But under previous DHAPs, public housing authorities have assisted survivors find housing units, and there may be individuals and families who prefer to find their own rental unit rather than being limited to hotels, motels, or apartments that FEMA has existing agreements with.

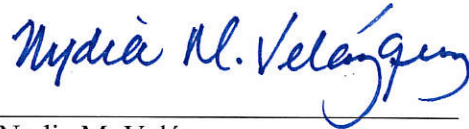
In sum, we respectfully request a response from FEMA explaining why an interagency agreement with HUD should not remain a viable option Puerto Rico, or other states and territories in the future. Further, if FEMA continues to insist that DHAP is not needed in Puerto Rico, we request that you identify specific policy changes that FEMA will make to address ongoing concerns with the existing options for transitional housing assistance that FEMA is providing. In particular, FEMA must address concerns that families are struggling to regain normalcy and stability in the face of multiple short-term extensions of their housing assistance and the burdensome requirements that they need to meet to qualify for those extensions. There are also concerns that families that have chosen to leave Puerto Rico have little help finding rental units in the continental U.S. Whether through DHAP or through changes in existing temporary housing assistance programs, FEMA must address these shortfalls and ensure that it is doing everything possible to help families recover from these disasters effectively.

Please respond to this letter by July 9, 2018. Thank you for your attention to these pressing matters. If you have any questions about this letter, please contact Esther Kahng, with Ranking Member Waters' office, at Esther.Kahng@mail.house.gov.

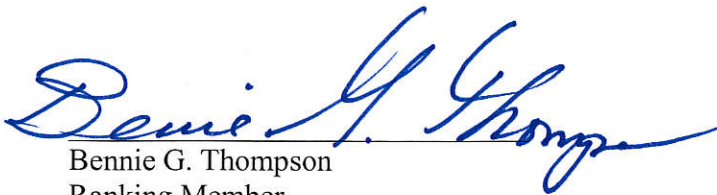
Sincerely,



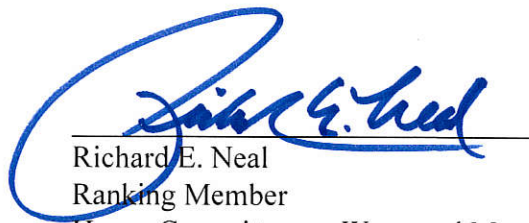
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