



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

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Hearing Statement of Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Recovery Subcommittee Chairman Doanld M. Payne, Jr. (D-NJ)

Road to Recovery: Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands after Hurricanes Irma and Maria

July 11, 2019

The Subcommittee is meeting to discuss the status of disaster recovery operations in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands following Hurricanes Irma and Maria. First, I want to thank our witnesses from Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and the Government Accountability Office for being here today. Your testimony will help the Subcommittee understand how much work is left to be done in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands after the devastating 2017 storms. As everyone can see, we have a critical witness absent from today's hearing. FEMA is a "no-show." FEMA was notified about this hearing nearly two months ago but would not confirm a witness.

A month ago, when I pressed the issue, Acting Administrator Gaynor testified he would work to provide a witness for today's hearing. Yet, here we are today without a FEMA witness. The agency has a personnel shortage, but you would think it would be able to provide a witness for a hearing on some of the most devastating storms our country experienced in modern history. If that empty chair isn't a perfect metaphor for this Administration's response to Hurricanes Irma and Maria, I don't know what is. Unfortunately, FEMA's absence today is just the latest example of the Administration's apathy towards Hurricanes Irma and Maria recovery and further underscores the need for this Committee to provide robust oversight.

Turning to the subject matter at hand, the unusually active 2017 hurricane season simultaneously produced intense storms in Texas and Florida and devastated Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. From the damage caused by these storms, the U.S. Virgin Islands is facing more than \$11 billion financial impact. The impact of Hurricane Maria alone left Puerto Rico with a death toll of nearly 3,000 and recovery is estimated over \$100 billion. And before the storms hit, Puerto Rico was dealing with a precarious financial situation, a disaster, that would have severely hampered the territory's recovery efforts for damage at any level, let alone back-to-back major hurricanes. With recovery being such a massive undertaking, I have serious concerns about the blanket use of Public Assistance Alternative Procedures in Puerto Rico being used to rebuild the island. I find the pace that FEMA is administering this program to be troubling. Nearly two years have passed, and permanent work in Puerto Rico has yet to begin. That means American schools, hospitals, roads, and other public places are still damaged from the storms and the timeline for work getting underway is unknown. Let that sink in for a moment.

I am also concerned about the very real possibility that the recovery project cost estimates will be underestimated, which would leave cash-strapped Puerto Rico on the hook for the overages. While the U.S. Virgin Islands was not required to use Public Assistance Alternative Procedures, the territory has recently opted to use this program moving forward in their recovery. Like Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands has yet to begin work on permanent projects, and again, critical community spaces are still sitting in two-year-old damage due in part to FEMA's slow pace. As such, I am interested to hear from our witnesses today the challenges associated with the use of Public Assistance Alternative Procedures to rebuild in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The extraordinary nature of the 2017 disasters and their impacts on our country provide an opportunity to learn, grow, and to make the Federal government's disaster response and recovery efforts better. For that, it is truly a shame that FEMA has decided not to participate in this hearing. On a personal note, as someone who dealt with the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, I cannot imagine how much more difficult recovery would have been if FEMA had refused to show up to talk to the American public about our recovery. Despite FEMA not being here today, I am heartened by the witnesses who did come to discuss this incredibly important matter.

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