

Senator Lamar Alexander
Chairman
Senator Patty Murray
Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
428 Senate Dirksen Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Alexander and Ranking Member Murray,

The undersigned organizations strongly support the bipartisan [request](#) for the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee to hold hearings to assess and address the ongoing education and health crisis in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands from the destructive hurricanes Irma and Maria.

It has been well over 100 days since the hurricanes made landfall, and American citizens are still struggling to regain basic living essentials. While some progress has been made, the U.S. territories are not only in recovery mode, their citizens are fighting to survive.

As we all witnessed in September, the U.S. Virgin Islands were hit with two Category 5 hurricanes over 12 days, with the second hurricane also making landfall as a Category 4 in Puerto Rico. Families still live in destroyed homes with blue tarps as partial, temporary roofing, while others are living in shelters and many have left the islands for the mainland. In Puerto Rico, schools and an unknown number of businesses are still closed, hospitals are still not fully functioning, and there are still long lines for water and ice.^[1] At the end of 2017, Gov. Ricardo Rossello stated that more than 660,000 Puerto Ricans were living without power, which is estimated to be 45 percent of the island's 1.5 million electricity customers. Based on U.S. Army Corps of Engineers estimates, full power restoration for Puerto Rico could take until May, right before the hurricane season of 2018 is set to begin.^[2] In the U.S. Virgin Islands, it is estimated that half the electric customers remain without power, about one-quarter of the territory is without cellphone service, and thousands of homes, businesses and other buildings were damaged or destroyed.^[3]

Progress toward recovery for health and education systems is slow-moving, especially without the basic infrastructure of safe water and electricity, without access to food and safe housing, and with hazards such as long-standing water, diseases and infections. In the U.S. Virgin Islands, nine schools were completely destroyed. Due to the significant damage to the hospitals, all patients are still being medevacked to the mainland.^[4] Puerto Rico has reopened 1,100 of the nearly 1,200 schools, with 38 being closed for structural damage, serving approximately 331,000 students. Many of these schools opened without access to power.^[5] Higher education institutions on the islands are similarly struggling to recover and serve students. Puerto Rico's largest hospital only has one of the five floors operational due to damage. As the process continues at its slow pace, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands are losing medical personnel, educators and families from the territories.

A focus of 2018 needs to be about rebuilding Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, but we need to ensure the Americans living there are safe and have the resources for basic living essentials. Families, individuals and businesses want to begin to be able to rebuild, have a safe home, go to work and school, and have access to safe drinking water and a doctor when they become ill. The Americans of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands desperately need help, and having access to public education and healthcare is essential to the recovery.

We ask for your committee to begin hearings on these issues immediately so that the full range of needs can be met for every U.S. citizen affected by hurricanes Irma and Maria. Thank you for your consideration of this request.

[1]<https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/puerto-rico-crisis/anger-grows-hope-fades-puerto-rico-s-ground-zero-remains-n833421>

[2]<https://qz.com/1169714/hurricane-maria-half-of-puerto-rico-still-doesnt-have-power/>

[3]http://www.tampabay.com/news/world/Recovering-what-was-lost-in-the-U-S-Virgin-Islands-one-boat-at-a-time_163722489

[4]<https://www.marketplace.org/2017/12/28/economy/rebuilding-plays-major-role-recovery-us-virgin-islands>

[5]<http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/2017/12/puerto-rico-schools-reopened-enrollment-dropped.html>