

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

October 16, 2017

Acting Secretary Eric Hargan
U.S. Department of Health and Human
Services
200 Independence Avenue, Southwest
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dr. Brenda Fitzgerald, MD
Centers for Disease Control and
Prevention
1600 Clifton Road
Atlanta, Georgia 30329

Dear Acting Secretary Hargan and Dr. Fitzgerald,

We are now approaching one month since Hurricane Maria ravaged Puerto Rico, and by all accounts – from my own firsthand, my constituents with families on the island, and the voluminous news reports that paint an increasingly grim picture – the public health situation in Puerto Rico is teetering toward a terrifying collapse that could lead to unprecedented sickness and death. Therefore, I request a full analysis of your short and long-term plans to mitigate the heightened risk of public health epidemics that may arise in the wake of these catastrophic natural disasters.

I have deep concerns with the Trump administration's flawed, faltering, and highly deficient response to this widening crisis, stemming in large part from the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) continued mismanagement in Puerto Rico. Due to the burgeoning public health crisis in Puerto Rico and the Trump administration's demonstrated inability to provide even a semblance of adequate disaster relief through other agencies, I am writing to request more information on what steps the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) are taking to prevent, surveil, and respond to the public health plight of the Puerto Rican people.

Three weeks after Hurricane Maria made landfall on Puerto Rico, over 35 percent of the population still has access to no clean drinking water, with some desperate enough to seek water from heavily polluted and hazardous Superfund sites. As the New York Times reports, even those with clean tap water are avoiding it as much as possible "because of reports that infectious diseases are spreading on the island."¹ These fears are not entirely unfounded, with ten suspected cases of leptospirosis, a disease spread by contaminated water, leading to at least four deaths.² It is critical that, in the absence of clean water, measures be taken to ensure leptospirosis and other illnesses caused by or spread through contaminated water be monitored and prevented.

¹ Dickerson, Caitlin. "Finding Water in Puerto Rico: An Endless Game of Cat and Mouse." The New York Times, 12 Oct. 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/10/12/us/puerto-rico-water-fema.html.

² "Puerto Rico Investigates Post-Hurricane Disease Outbreak." STAT, 11 Oct. 2017, www.statnews.com/2017/10/11/puerto-rico-disease-outbreak/.

Due to Puerto Rico's tropical and humid conditions, I am also deeply troubled by the dangerous spread of mosquito-borne illnesses. Dr. Carmen Zorrilla, who bravely remained in Puerto Rico to continue working in her hospital, wrote in the *New England Journal of Medicine* that the "reactivation of dengue, Zika, and chikungunya epidemics is one major concern" in the aftermath of the storm.³ Indeed, following storms as cataclysmic as Hurricane Maria, infectious diseases and preventable illnesses proliferate, making a robust, and timely public health response to prevent further death even more urgent and necessary.

Without immediate action to prevent disease from spreading in the first place, treating those who have fallen ill will undoubtedly burden an already stressed medical system. Hospitals lack power, antibiotics, and other medicines, and Puerto Rico's damaged infrastructure has made accessing care and supplies even more challenging. HHS and CDC must emphasize to the Administration the widespread need for disease control, surveillance, prevention, and treatment both immediately and well into the future to prevent his humanitarian crisis from growing.

Further, CDC must immediately work to confirm the number of deaths that have occurred – directly or indirectly – as a result of Hurricane Maria. While the official death toll still sits at 45, some estimates have the number at ten times that, with overcrowded morgues and skyrocketing death rates being reported. It is imperative that Americans, including top officials, understand the full scope of devastation being endured by our fellow citizens in Puerto Rico.⁴

Therefore, I request a response detailing the actions HHS and CDC have taken to immediately address the public health and infectious disease concerns that are threatening Puerto Rico. I also request more information on the long-term plan being implemented to ensure that public health remains a priority as Puerto Rico rebuilds and recovers. Finally, I request, as quickly as possible, an official accounting of the total number of deaths that Puerto Rico has endured thus far at the hands of Hurricane Maria. I left Puerto Rico deeply inspired by the courageous, and hardworking public servants that have dedicated their time and energy towards lending a hand to their fellow Americans. I believe it stands as a disservice to them and the people of Puerto Rico if the difficult questions being asked of FEMA and other agencies continue to go unanswered.

Sincerely,



RICHARD BLUMENTHAL
United States Senator

³ Zorrilla, Carmen D. "The View from Puerto Rico - Hurricane Maria and Its Aftermath — NEJM." *New England Journal of Medicine*, 11 Oct. 2017, www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMp1713196.

⁴ Eliza Barclay and Alexia Fernández Campbell. "Everything That's Been Reported about Deaths in Puerto Rico Is at Odds with the Official Count." *Vox*, 11 Oct. 2017, www.vox.com/science-and-health/2017/10/11/16424356/puerto-rico-official-hurricane-maria-death-toll.