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October 12, 2017

President Donald J. Trump
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Trump:

Last week, the head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency said the humanitarian crisis in Puerto Rico was the “the most logistically challenging event the United States has ever seen.” I know firsthand the scope and scale of the catastrophe – just days ago I toured the island and witnessed the immense devastation that was left in the wake of Hurricane Maria, a storm stronger than anything Puerto Rico has seen in a century. That is why I am puzzled and perplexed that the administration is failing to treat this disaster like the logistical nightmare that the FEMA administrator considers it to be. Moreover, I am shocked and dismayed by your statements this morning that reveal an eagerness to abandon the island in its hour of need. The catastrophe demands a response on par with the enormity of the problem. I demand that you immediately affirm a long-term commitment to the island and appoint an official who can lead the federal effort and ensure a full and robust recovery for all of Puerto Rico’s residents, as well for the Virgin Islands.

So far, the results of the administration’s response – or lack thereof – are shameful. Nearly three weeks since the hurricane made landfall, ninety percent of island residents still lack electricity. Nearly thirty-five percent of residents lack access to potable water. Hospitals and physicians complain about lack of basic medical supplies. Residents are complaining of a scarcity of nearly every commodity necessary for modern life. Reports of diseases like leptospirosis, which is caused by contaminated water, are beginning to emerge.

FEMA is tasked with coordinating the federal response and solving these immediate crises. FEMA is suited to handle many disasters, and its personnel have certainly been critical in the many life-saving efforts underway on Puerto Rico. Likewise, many first responders and personnel from other federal agencies and our military branches have been key over the past few weeks. But I am increasingly worried the enormity of the challenge is well outside the scope of the agency. Moreover, FEMA is housed within the Department of Homeland Security, an agency with leadership problems that has been allowed to languish without a secretary for months. Many top FEMA and DHS officials are serving in an acting or unconfirmed capacity. This is coupled with challenges faced by the Puerto Rican government, staffed by many island residents who are

also victims of the storm, struggling to get their lives back in order at the same time they need to serve in a public capacity.

We need an official who is qualified and capable of taking over this challenge – someone who can lead a massive, inter-agency effort that cuts through bureaucratic lines. I urge you to appoint someone with the background and experience necessary to command and oversee dozens of agencies and missions – including the might of our military, which should be brought to bear to help anyone in need on the island. The official should be someone who won't dwell on excuses but will deal in results and is not beholden to politics, publicity or ideology. They should be skilled in emergency management and not interested showmanship. Finally, the official should work with local leaders, not tune them out and ignore their needs.

Some of my colleagues and I have already raised the need for the appointment of a czar-like official to lead recovery efforts. I hereby reiterate and amplify those concerns. As someone who proudly represents a state with the highest concentration of Puerto Ricans in the United States, I stress how important it is that the federal government be there for the long haul and that crisis be managed properly for the sake of the residents and the island's future.

I appreciate your attention to this matter and look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Richard Blumenthal
United States Senate