



Legislation Text

File #: Res 0633-2018, **Version:** *

Res. No. 633

Resolution condemning the Trump Administration's response to Hurricane María.

By Council Member Cabrera

Whereas, The Commonwealth of Puerto Rico (Puerto Rico), an unincorporated territory of the United States (U.S.), is an island located between the Caribbean Sea and the North Atlantic Ocean, east of the Dominican Republic, with an estimated 3.4 million citizens as of July 2017; and

Whereas, The Virgin Islands of the United States (U.S. Virgin Islands), an unincorporated organized U.S. territory, consists of the four larger islands of St. Croix, St. John, St. Thomas and Water Island, as well as about 50 surrounding minor islands, are located between the Caribbean Sea and the North Atlantic Ocean, and east of Puerto Rico, with an estimated 107,000 citizens as of July 2017; and

Whereas, On September 5, 2017, Hurricane Irma, a category 5 storm, hit St. John and St. Thomas before passing about 60 miles north of Puerto Rico, unleashing lashing winds and rains that left more than a million people without power and tens of thousands without potable water on the islands before hitting Florida with heavy winds and significant coastal flooding that extended into the Carolinas; and

Whereas, In addition to extensive damage and destruction, Hurricane Irma is also directly responsible for 134 deaths; three in Puerto Rico, four in the U.S. Virgin Islands, and 90 on the U.S. mainland; and

Whereas, About two weeks after Hurricane Irma, on September 20, 2017, another category 5 storm, Hurricane María, crossed St. Croix before passing the southeast coast of Puerto Rico; and

Whereas, Hurricanes Irma and María caused catastrophic flooding, destroyed 80-90 percent of structures in some towns, decimated power and communication grids-causing the largest blackout in U.S.

history-and contaminated much of the drinking water in both the U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico; and

Whereas, In the wake of two consecutive natural disasters, hospitals on the islands struggled to function, shortages of diesel fuel prevented supermarkets from opening and generators from working, and many ran out of food and water within days; and

Whereas, The day after Hurricane María made landfall in Puerto Rico, President Donald Trump called local officials on the island, issued an emergency declaration, and pledged all federal resources would be directed to help, but then for four days afterward the Administration did not make any public statements about the evolving crisis; and

Whereas, The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), in its 2017 Hurricane FEMA After-Action Report (“Report”), revealed that their plans for a crisis in Puerto Rico were based on a focused disaster like a tsunami, not a major hurricane devastating the whole island; and

Whereas, The Report revealed that although FEMA sent thousands of emergency responders to Puerto Rico following Hurricane María, the agency had thousands fewer workers than were needed, and more than half of those deployed were unqualified for the jobs they were doing in the field; and

Whereas, FEMA also admitted that it vastly underestimated how much food and fresh water it would need, and how hard it would be to get additional supplies to Puerto Rico, especially since the contents of the FEMA warehouse on the island was nearly emptied two weeks prior to Hurricane María, having been rushed to aid the U.S. Virgin Islands following Hurricane Irma; and

Whereas, On September 11, 2018, U.S. Senator Jeff Merkley released a document showing a transfer of \$9.8 million from FEMA to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, accusing the Trump Administration of diverting funds from hurricane relief to pay for its immigration crackdown just as hurricane season was starting; and

Whereas, A few weeks after Hurricane María, President Trump visited Puerto Rico for a briefing with local leaders and federal responders and stated that the disaster “threw our budget a little out of whack,” before

claiming it was not “a real catastrophe like [Hurricane] Katrina,” and accusing Puerto Rico of costing the government too much money; and

Whereas, Disaster response and reconstruction in both the U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico has been complicated by the territories’ debt, and lack of access to the benefits many federal programs, including Supplemental Security Income, the Earned Income Tax Credit, and full access to Medicaid; and

Whereas, According to a Post-Kaiser Family Foundation poll (“the Poll”) of Puerto Rico residents conducted July 2-August 29, 2018, 83 percent of Puerto Ricans said the hurricanes affected their lives in major in lasting ways and 93 percent believe more resources are necessary for improving basic infrastructure such as roads and highways; and

Whereas, Other key findings of the Poll include that 44 percent of Puerto Ricans reported that they were without grid power for four or more months, 42 percent had employment losses, 26 percent said their home was destroyed or majorly damages, 21 percent said their vehicle was damaged, 21 percent claimed to have resorted to drinking water from a natural source and 23 percent reported that they or a family member have a new or worsened health condition; and

Whereas, Moreover, the Poll found that 55 percent of Puerto Ricans believe rebuilding Puerto Rico is not a priority for the federal government, 58 percent rate the federal response as fair or poor, and 61 percent believe Puerto Rico would have fared better if it were not a territory but a state; and

Whereas, According to U.S. Census Bureau data for 2017, New York is home to more Puerto Ricans than any other state with an estimated population of 1.1 million, of whom nearly 64 percent (an estimated 708,000) reside in one of the five boroughs; and

Whereas, According to U.S. Census Bureau data for 2017, New York City (NYC) is home to an estimated 2,455 U.S. Virgin Islanders; and

Whereas, NYC and Puerto Rico share a long and rich history characterized by the continual migration from the island to the city and the city’s Puerto Rican community’s contributions to the creation of hip hop

music, as well as many forms of Latin music, including Salsa and Freestyle; and

Whereas, NYC and the U.S. Virgin Islands also share a long and rich history: Casper Holstein, Hubert Harrison, Ashley Totten and Frank Crosswaith, U.S. Virgin Islanders who resided in Harlem during the late 19th and early- to mid- 20th Centuries, were influential political and civil rights activists and labor organizers who drove Black labor organization and politics; and

Whereas, Despite the documented devastation and loss of life, during an Oval Office briefing on preparations for Hurricane Florence, President Trump said that he thought “Puerto Rico was an incredible, unsung success,” in response to a reporter asking if there were lessons to be learned from the widely criticized FEMA response to Hurricane María in Puerto Rico; and

Whereas, According to an August 28, 2018 report published by researchers at George Washington University, Hurricane María was the deadliest natural disaster to hit U.S. soil in more than a century, with a death toll of 2,975 in the six months following the storm; and

Whereas, One year after Hurricane María made landfall, U.S. Congress has yet to hold a single hearing on its impact while the number of deaths attributed to it and its aftermath now surpass the number of deaths attributed to Hurricane Katrina, and are comparable to the number of people killed during the September 11 attacks of 2001; now, therefore, be it

Resolved, That the Council of the City of New York condemns the Trump Administration’s response to Hurricane María.

LS #8139
10/19/2018
CGR