



Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development

3211 FOURTH STREET NE • WASHINGTON DC 20017-1194 • 202-541-3160

WEBSITE: WWW.USCCB.ORG/JPHD • FAX 202-541-3339

October 12, 2017

United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator:

In the wake of unthinkable devastation caused by recent hurricanes, the people of Puerto Rico face an unprecedented level of need that calls for meaningful action that addresses both immediate and long-term needs of the people of Puerto Rico – especially regarding food security, health care access, and sustainable alleviation of the island’s debt.

In his encyclical *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis points out, “These days, [the excluded] are mentioned in international political and economic discussions, but one often has the impression that their problems are brought up as an afterthought, a question which gets added almost out of duty or in a tangential way, if not treated merely as collateral damage.” When it comes to the effects of Puerto Rico’s debt, the people of Puerto Rico are not merely collateral damage. Congress has a duty to go to the aid of those in crisis and seek real solutions for our fellow citizens.

Reports indicate that Puerto Rico’s agricultural sector has been decimated – there will be nearly no food grown on the island for at least a year. Preliminary reports from Puerto Rico’s Department of Agriculture indicate that the cost to Puerto Rico will approach \$780 million in agricultural yields – an unprecedented level of destruction. Moreover, many of the islands from which Puerto Rico imports its foods – Caribbean islands like the Dominican Republic, Dominica, and St. Martin – were also hit by the hurricane, and the future of those countries’ exports is uncertain. Food security remains a paramount concern for the people of Puerto Rico, who were already suffering from painful poverty and hunger. Therefore, it is essential that Congress pass a funding package that helps to rebuild the agricultural sector in Puerto Rico, a critical part of its economy and a means by which many of the poorest residents of the island rely for their daily bread.

Puerto Rico could be on the verge of a public health crisis. Forty-four percent of Puerto Rico’s population currently lack access to potable water. Puerto Rico’s hospitals are particularly strained. In Puerto Rico, 1.6 million locations do not have power, leaving hospitals relying on diesel generators to provide lifesaving treatment – and only 11 of 69 hospitals have either power or fuel supply. Many of the hospitals were flooded, and are strewn with debris. The consequences are severe.

In addition to limiting health professionals’ capacity to respond to those injured by the effects of the hurricane, the damage will also have significant long-term consequences for the health care sector in a region that is already vulnerable to many tropical vector-borne diseases, such as Dengue fever and the Zika Virus. Prioritizing the provision of potable water to all people on the island and increasing the level of emergency medical assistance to the people of Puerto Rico is

vital at this time. The country must also consider the long-term health needs of the people of Puerto Rico and invest in the redevelopment of their hospitals and health care centers. Moreover, Congress should also work to ensure access for Puerto Ricans to all federal public health funds that are available to the fifty States.

The people of Puerto Rico have been facing serious problems for many years: painful poverty and hunger, persistent joblessness, and other social problems resulting from the financial crisis gripping the Commonwealth's economy. They bear little responsibility for the island's financial situation yet have suffered most of the consequences. Now, the recent devastation has made the circumstances, especially for those in need, unbearable. Now is the time for you to take meaningful and comprehensive steps to help alleviate the intense burdens in Puerto Rico, particularly for the most vulnerable.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Frank J. Dewane". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small cross at the beginning.

Most Rev. Frank J. Dewane
Bishop of Venice
Chairman, Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development
United States Conference of Catholic Bishop



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United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative:

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