

## **DeLauro-Meng Report on Recent Travel to Puerto Rico**

Rep. Rosa DeLauro and Rep. Grace Meng, members of the House Appropriations Committee, traveled to Puerto Rico on January 25 and January 26 to assess the recovery effort underway.



Rep. DeLauro and Rep. Meng meet with Dr. Rafael Rodriguez Mercado, Secretary of Health

“While Puerto Rico has made progress since Hurricanes Irma and Maria devastated the island in September, the reality is that much more remains to be done to restore services and basic necessities, as well as health care, to millions of Puerto Ricans—especially families in rural and interior parts of Puerto Rico. If Americans on the mainland had been hit by this type of natural disaster, there would not be a question about providing the resources needed to recover. It is clear that history has its eyes on us—and how we handle this catastrophe. For my part, I will keep fighting to make Puerto Rico whole. It is not just our obligation as a nation—it is our moral obligation.”

*-- Rep. Rosa DeLauro*

“More than four months after Hurricane Maria wreaked havoc on Puerto Rico, the island continues to struggle with efforts to recover and rebuild,” said Meng. “During my visit, I saw the devastation first-hand and spoke with local residents about the conditions that they’ve been forced to endure. Puerto Rico continues to need help and assistance. Many still have no power; damage remains to property and infrastructure; and people continue to suffer. As a member of the Appropriations Committee, I will continue to do all I can to ensure that our fellow Americans receive the aid they need. We cannot forget or ignore the struggles that our brothers and sisters on the island continue to endure.

*-- Rep. Grace Meng*

## ***Healthcare***

During their two-day site visit to Puerto Rico, Rep. Rosa DeLauro and Rep. Grace Meng joined Dr. Rafael Rodriguez Mercado, Puerto Rico's Secretary of Health, to visit Hospital Centro Medico, Puerto Rico's Level-1 Trauma Center. The Congresswomen also visited HealthProMed, a Community Health Center in San Juan.

Health care practitioners highlighted serious challenges over the course of their discussions.

- There is an ongoing exodus of doctors, nurses, and health care professionals who are leaving Puerto Rico and moving to the mainland. Puerto Rico's Secretary of Health estimated that 600 to 700 doctors had left Puerto Rico since September.
- Puerto Rico's largest public hospital, Centro Medico, needs assistance to make repairs following Hurricanes Irma and Maria. The hospital also needs assistance to procure another MRI machine, as well as other health care equipment.
- Many health clinics in Puerto Rico are operating on reduced hours and relying on generators for power. On two smaller islands, Vieques and Culebra, there is reduced access to primary health care services and emergency services—and no access to specialists.
- Puerto Rico needs to increase its use of telemedicine to reach communities in the rural and interior areas, as well as add mobile facilities to serve the smaller islands and harder-to-reach mountainous regions.
- Even before Hurricanes Irma and Maria, Puerto Rico's Medicaid program was facing severe financial difficulty. The Puerto Rican government is required to cover nearly half of the cost of the Medicaid program, while some states on the mainland pay as little as 20 percent. This is a massive disparity that has hurt Puerto Rico's healthcare system.
- Nearly half of the population of Puerto Rico is covered by Medicaid. If Medicaid funds are exhausted, about one million people will lose health coverage.
- Puerto Rico's Medicaid program needs an infusion of \$5 to 8 billion over the next two years, along with a waiver of its local match and support for individuals displaced to the States—which Congress gave to Louisiana after Katrina.
- Hospitals and health care providers in Connecticut, New York, and across the United States are dealing with a dangerous shortage of saline IV bags due to a disruption of production on the island. Baxter International, the main producer of IV bags, has gotten their production facility back up to capacity, but the unreliable power grid has caused problems. The FDA is working with the facilities to ensure that the supply problems begin to improve in the first three months of this year.

## ***Housing and Infrastructure***

On their first day in Puerto Rico, Rep. DeLauro and Rep. Meng took a 60-minute helicopter tour of the interior region of the island.

- The interior mountainous regions continue to struggle. In these areas, transportation is still extremely difficult. Some roads are impassable.
- FEMA currently expects to restore power to 100 percent of individuals by June.
- FEMA has commissioned a long-term infrastructure plan, which is due within 180 days. It is critical that recovery efforts align with a long-term plan that ensures future infrastructure is modern and resilient. A long-term plan needs to chart a course for a prosperous Puerto Rico that has the same standard of living we expect in the States.
- In addition, on the mainland, there are ongoing issues with FEMA's Transitional Shelter Assistance (TSA) program. In Connecticut, FEMA approved an extension to provide assistance to 45 families in error—there are now 24 families without a place to go. TSA should be extended to February 14 for families originally deemed eligible, as FEMA originally promised.

## ***Education***

On their second day in Puerto Rico, Rep. DeLauro and Rep. Meng visited Escuela San Agustin, an elementary school in San Juan.

- Escuela San Agustin was without power from September 6 until January 10. During that time, the school limited the class schedule to 7:30 am – 12:30 pm each day. More than 50 students moved to the U.S.
- Many schools have been operating on limited hours due to lack of power. School closures forced children to relocate to schools far away from their homes. Some children are traveling three hours to get to school.
- Schools lost their internet connection for several months, and some schools still lack internet access, making it difficult for teachers and students to access digital learning tools and content.
- The entire school system is experiencing a shortage of professional staff as many teachers evacuated to the mainland.
- Teachers also noted the need for counselors to assist children with post-disaster crisis and mental health counseling.
- Hurricanes and storms are traumatic experiences, and research is unequivocal about the long-term impact of trauma on early brain development. Infants, toddlers, and young children are very much aware of their environments, and are particularly susceptible to the stresses and fears that face the adults around them, as well as the dangers of disasters themselves.

- Following Hurricane Maria, Escuela San Agustin became a local recreation center, teaching students for the first half of the day and serving 300 lunches daily.
- Teachers noted that Escuela San Agustin needs educational supplies and equipment, including computers and electronic blackboards for classrooms, as well as teachers for English and Special Education classes.
- Escuela San Agustin also needs to repair structural damage caused by Hurricane Maria, including damaged ceilings and playgrounds.



Rep. DeLauro and Rep. Meng visit with school kids at Escuela San Agustin in San Juan.

### ***CDC Dengue Branch and Laboratory***

On their second day in Puerto Rico, Rep. DeLauro and Rep. Meng visited the CDC's Dengue Branch and Laboratory in San Juan.

- CDC's Dengue Branch and Laboratory suffered structural damages, including leaks and mold.
- The facility spent more than 100 days on generators before power was restored. For the first seven weeks after the hurricanes, less than 10 percent of staff had power at their homes.

- CDC staff are taking a lead role in distributing information to the local population about public health issues arising from the hurricanes—including information about preventing the spread of infectious diseases and mold—as well as distributing supplies for water treatment and mosquito protection.
- Unfortunately, surveillance activities had to be temporarily halted and public health laboratories were closed in the aftermath of the hurricanes.
- Surveillance re-started in October and some labs are now returning to functionality. CDC's Infectious Disease Task Force is monitoring data to identify any increases in particular diseases.
- CDC experts are concerned about a significant increase in *Aedes aegypti* mosquitoes following the hurricanes, as well as high levels of resistance to pesticide. They noted that approximately one-in-five individuals in Puerto Rico has been infected with Zika virus at some point since the initial outbreak in 2016.

### ***Meeting with Mayor Carmen Yulin Cruz***

On their second day in Puerto Rico, Rep. DeLauro and Rep. Meng met with Carmen Yulin Cruz, Mayor of San Juan, who has been a passionate advocate for Puerto Rico as she coordinates the recovery effort in the capital.

- Mayor Carmen Yulin Cruz described many of the challenges of the last few months, including restoring the power grid, delivering relief supplies, and navigating government bureaucracy. She stressed the need for emergency disaster relief funding, as well as additional funding for Puerto Rico's Medicaid program.
- Mayor Cruz noted that as many as half of municipalities could shut down in June—the beginning of their fiscal year—without an infusion of funds. That would result in the loss of municipal services like garbage pick-up, along with countless other local services.
- Mayor Cruz expressed a concern about the possibility of FEMA cutting back on distribution of diesel fuel, which is still in high demand.
- Mayor Cruz requested a partial waiver of the Stafford Act to allow rebuilding efforts to plan for resiliency and mitigate future risks. She also requested a partial waiver of the Jones Act—at the very least, to allow for shipping of supplies necessary for disaster relief.
- Mayor Cruz noted an ongoing need for electrical poles, noting that Puerto Rico is projected to need 60,000 electrical poles but has only been able to procure 10,000-12,000 poles. (The Mayor further noted that an offer from South Africa to deliver electrical poles ran afoul of the Jones Act.)
- Mayor Cruz envisioned a significant increase in renewable solar energy as the power grid is rebuilt. She also described opportunities for Puerto Rico to attract solar panel manufacturing to the island.

## ***Long Term Recovery for Puerto Rico***

- The next hurricane season begins in June, so Puerto Rico's recovery effort needs to make a lot of progress over the next four months.
- The House passed a disaster relief package on December 21 that included approximately \$81 billion in emergency supplemental appropriations to respond to hurricanes and wildfires. The House-passed bill did not include necessary funding for Puerto Rico's Medicaid program.
- The Senate passed a disaster relief package on February 9 that included approximately \$89 billion in emergency supplemental appropriations to respond to hurricanes and wildfires. It included \$4.9 billion for Medicaid programs in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The House subsequently passed the same disaster relief package on February 9 and it was signed into law.