



9/28/2017

President Donald Trump
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Trump:

On behalf of the American College of Physicians (ACP), I am writing to urge you to consider taking additional actions to provide immediate assistance and relief to the roughly 3.5 million American citizens in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands currently recovering from the aftermath of Hurricane Maria. We are encouraged by your administration's decision to temporarily waive the Jones Act for Puerto Rico, which will alleviate shortages of basic necessities on the island, as well as the decision to deploy needed military resources to the island, like the USNS Comfort naval hospital ship and military personnel. However, as millions continue to live without reliable access to food, water, fuel, and electricity, we ask that you consider taking additional actions, as recommended in this letter, to accelerate and improve the response and recovery on the ground, and prevent the situation from turning into an even greater public health and humanitarian crisis.

The American College of Physicians is the largest medical specialty organization and the second-largest physician group in the United States. ACP members include 152,000 internal medicine physicians (internists), related subspecialists, and medical students. Internal medicine physicians are specialists who apply scientific knowledge and clinical expertise to the diagnosis, treatment, and compassionate care of adults across the spectrum from health to complex illness. ACP has an active chapter in Puerto Rico, with over 500 ACP members in the territory.

While ACP is not an expert on how best to provide the necessary recovery assistance, several steps have been recommended by those with such expertise that merit consideration:

1. Work with Congress to make available increased emergency dollars for FEMA to engage in immediate relief efforts. Ensure that FEMA designates all of Puerto Rico's municipalities as having federal disaster declaration status.

Preliminary estimates have placed damages caused by Hurricane Maria as high as \$85 billion, while only 50 percent of homes on the islands have storm insurance coverage. Nearly 100 percent of those affected are still without electricity while only 40 percent of Puerto Ricans have access to potable water. With an aging infrastructure completely destroyed by the storm

and municipalities and utility companies facing existing financial crises of their own, local governments will need federal assistance to rebuild their communities and protect the health and security of their residents. It is essential that your administration and Congress make available increased emergency dollars for FEMA to engage in immediate relief efforts.

As of September 24, 24 of Puerto Rico's 78 municipalities have yet to receive a federal disaster declaration by the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Affected individuals residing in municipalities with a federal disaster declaration status are eligible to receive federal funding, including grants for housing repairs and costs, subsidized loans for uninsured property loss, among other programs.

2. Deploy additional resources, including increased assistance from the military, to help avert the emerging public health disaster in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Priority should be given to restoring the ability of hospitals and physicians to provide needed medical care.

We acknowledge and appreciate the important steps the American military is taking to help Puerto Rico, including providing military vehicles to clear roads and bring in supplies, deploying the Coast Guard to deliver meals and water, and deploying the USNS Comfort naval hospital to provide urgent medical care to those affected. Nevertheless, we ask that your administration assess whether additional U.S. military resources might be deployed to address the crisis and avert imminent harm to millions of American citizens that currently have no access to potable water, are without electricity, lack access to medical care, and may be experiencing other threats to their health and well-being. With continued reports of fuel, food, and potable water shortages on the ground due to a shortage of truck drivers and difficulties in distributing resources to remote areas and places made inaccessible by storm damage, it is particularly important to consider steps to make additional resources available to repair and re-open the islands' damaged airports, provide personnel to clear debris preventing access to difficult to reach areas, and assist local law enforcement in providing security.

It is especially important the federal government's recovery and relief efforts prioritize making it possible for hospitals and other health care facilities to operate with adequate electricity, running water and sanitation, supplies, and medications, and to facilitate the ability of physicians and other health professional within the islands, and on the mainland, to provide assistance.

3. Increase Medicaid funding to Puerto Rico.

As a territory of the U.S., Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands receive proportionately less reimbursement from the federal government for their Medicaid programs compared to states. While the Affordable Care Act provided a one-time pool of funds for territories, that money is expected to run out by the end of this year, leaving Puerto Rico with a \$300 million deficit for FY2018. Without increased funding, over 900,000 Americans are at risk of losing access to care in Puerto Rico. We urge you to work with Congress to increase Medicaid funding so that hurricane victims can ensure they will continue to have access to care as the island recovers.

4. Work with Congress and HHS to provide increased funding to prevent another Zika outbreak like Puerto Rico saw in past years.

The [Wall Street Journal reports](#) that there is growing concern that Puerto Rico may experience another outbreak of the Zika virus because of Hurricane Maria. "The island is now full of many bodies of standing water, said Dr. Cordero, a former dean of the University of Puerto Rico's College of Public Health. Normal mosquito-control activities, such as going house to house to spray, running air conditioning, or putting screens in windows, are difficult or impossible given the level of damage and power outages, he said."

5. Ask federal agencies to help educate the public that Puerto Rico is not a foreign country and that the residents of Puerto Rico are United States citizens.

There is evidence that many Americans are unaware that, as a U.S. territory, the residents of Puerto Rico are U.S. citizens. This misconception may undermine public support for providing the necessary recovery assistance to our fellow citizens.

6. Partner with ACP and other medical organizations to facilitate disaster recovery.

With recovery efforts already underway, ACP and the physician community stand ready and willing to assist in any way possible. ACP has already begun promoting [hurricane relief resources](#) to our membership and we invite your administration to partner with ACP and other medical organizations on how we can most effectively help, such as by identifying volunteer opportunities for our members and serving as a clearinghouse for information.

As each day passes without adequate access to basic necessities and health care services, the public health crisis in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands will continue to become more dire. We respectfully urge your administration to consider taking additional actions to address the unfolding humanitarian crisis threatening the lives and livelihood of millions of American citizens affected by Hurricane Maria.

Sincerely,



Jack Ende, MD, MACP
President

Cc: The Honorable James Mattis, Secretary, Department of Defense
The Honorable Tom Price, Secretary, Department of Health and Human Services
The Honorable William Long, Administrator, Federal Emergency Management Agency