

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker of the House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Sept. 20, 2019

Dear Speaker Pelosi:

On the second anniversary of Hurricane Maria, the undersigned group of Puerto Rican advocates, racial- and social-justice organizations, and media and telecommunications advocacy groups urge Congress to use all of its oversight authorities to examine the recovery on Puerto Rico. Specifically, we write regarding the current status of recovery efforts related to the telecommunications infrastructure on the islands.

Hurricanes Irma and Maria devastated Puerto Rico in September 2017. They destroyed much of the island's critical infrastructure, including its communication networks. The inability to communicate during and after the disaster contributed to the islands' historic death toll. It hampered recovery efforts, and prevented people from being able to seek help and access life-saving services.

Two years later, we still know very little about the contributing causes of the communications crisis in Puerto Rico. While the Federal Communications Commission has awarded telecom companies federal funding to restore service, we know little about how the companies are spending that money or the nature and pace of restoration efforts.

The expert agencies tasked with restoring communication services — the FCC and the Federal Emergency Management Agency — have failed to investigate why these communications networks collapsed. The FCC has produced scant information in response to our Freedom of Information Act request on why it took so long to restore service, and in fact that service has yet to be fully restored. FEMA has yet to produce a single document.

The FCC has a history of investigating disruptions to communications networks caused by a disaster. It did so after Hurricane Katrina in 2006. That led to policy changes such as the expansion of the Lifeline program, which previously subsidized only landline telephone service for low-income people, to cover wireless services. The agency also produced a report following Hurricane Michael in 2018, which resulted in the FCC criticizing the lack of coordination among wireless- and landline-service providers, power crews and municipalities in restoring communications in the wake of that storm. However, this report was far from a comprehensive investigation.

Yet the FCC's report on the Atlantic hurricane season of 2017, which included Hurricane Maria, failed to provide any useful or critical analysis of why there was a near-total collapse in communications in Puerto Rico.

The intensity of storms and extreme weather is only increasing due to climate change. We fear that hurricanes like Maria and Dorian will become the norm. Investigating what happened in Puerto Rico is critical to adopting policies that could help Puerto Ricans, communities of color and poor people who are often the most impacted by climate change. Puerto Rico is currently a colonial possession of the United States, but this does not mean Puerto Ricans can be denied their civil and human rights to communicate.

This is why we urge Congress to use all of its oversight powers, and to hold hearings on how the Trump FCC responded to the communications crisis in Puerto Rico, in order to understand what happened and then hold everyone — both government officials and departments, as well as private actors — accountable for their failures.

Sincerely,

Color Of Change
Collective Action for Puerto Rico
Common Cause
Demand Progress
Fight for the Future
Free Press Action
Greenpeace US
May First/ People Link
MediaJustice
Mijente
National Consumer Law Center, on behalf of its low-income clients
National Hispanic Media Coalition
Public Citizen
Resilient Just Technologies
United Church of Christ, OC inc.

Dr. Andres Torres, Lehman College (retired)
Aramis Cruz-Domínguez, president, CWA Local 3010
Arlene Davila, New York University
Benita Jackson, Smith College
Clara Rodriguez, Boqueron Environmental Center
Federico Subervi, University of Wisconsin
Frances R. Aparicio, Northwestern University
Ginetta E Candelario, Smith College
Gloria Tristani, former FCC commissioner
Jillian Baez, Hunter College
Jose Ortega, president, TNG-CWA 33225

Juan González, journalism professor, Rutgers University
Julie Skogsbergh, University of Massachusetts Amherst
Mari Castañeda, University of Massachusetts Amherst
María Elena Cepeda, Williams College
Marisol Negrón, Ph.D., University of Massachusetts Boston
Oscar F. Gil, Binghamton University
Rosa Clemente, Puerto Rico On the Map
Roselyn Negrón, University of Massachusetts Boston
Vanessa Martinez, Holyoke Community College

cc:

Rep. Steny Hoyer
Majority Leader

Rep. James Clyburn
Majority Whip

Rep. Ben Ray Luján
Assistant Speaker

Rep. Frank Pallone
Chair, House Energy and Commerce Committee

Rep. Hakeem Jeffries
Democratic Caucus Chairman

Rep. Joaquin Castro
Chair, Congressional Hispanic Caucus

Rep. Karen Bass
Chair, Congressional Black Caucus

Rep. Mark Pocan
Co-chair, Congressional Progressive Caucus

Rep. Pramila Jayapal
Co-chair, Congressional Progressive Caucus