



Legislation Text

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**File #:** Res 0562-2018, **Version:** A

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Res. No. 562-A

Resolution calling on the United States Congress to pass, and the President to sign, legislation that would establish a national commission on the federal response to the 2017 natural disasters in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

By Council Member Ayala, The Speaker (Council Member Johnson) and Council Members Rivera, Salamanca, Miller, Rosenthal and Chin

Whereas, New York City has the largest Puerto Rican population of any mainland city and many New Yorkers have deep ties to the Island; and,

Whereas, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands are both part of the Second Federal Reserve District that is overseen by the Federal Reserve Bank of New York; and,

Whereas, In September 2017, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands were hit by a series of natural disasters that included hurricanes, landslides and widespread flooding; and,

Whereas, The most devastating of these was Hurricane Maria; and,

Whereas, Together, these disasters destroyed more than a third of homes in Puerto Rico, knocked out power to all 3.4 million residents and contributed to the spread of disease; and,

Whereas, In the U.S. Virgin Islands, with a population of just over 100,000, the hurricanes destroyed approximately 18,500 homes and businesses; and,

Whereas, Two months after the hurricanes hit the U.S. Virgin Islands, over two thirds of the residents remained without power; and,

Whereas, Credit rating agency Moody's estimated the cost of the damage in Puerto Rico be somewhere between \$45 billion and \$95 billion; and,

Whereas, In addition to the devastating effects on Puerto Rico's environment, infrastructure and

economy, the hurricanes caused widespread fatalities; and,

Whereas, The original death toll, which was the official tally for months, stated that only 64 fatalities were due to the hurricanes and their lingering effects; and,

Whereas, However, a recent study by researchers from the George Washington University put the death toll at nearly 3,000, which is more than 46 times the official count; and,

Whereas, Officials in Puerto Rico have failed to be transparent with the information and data on the impact of the natural disasters; and,

Whereas, Information has become so difficult to access that news outlets CNN and the Center for Investigative Journalism sued the Puerto Rican government for access to death records and associated data; and,

Whereas, Lack of information and poor coordination also continues to plague recovery efforts in the U.S. Virgin Islands; and,

Whereas, After the hurricanes hit the U.S. Virgin Islands, there were more than 1,000 medical evacuees who were sent to either Atlanta, Puerto Rico or some other mainland state; and,

Whereas, However, nine months after the hurricanes hit, the location of some medical evacuees was unknown while others, who were keen to return home to the islands could not be accommodated because the territory was still struggling to rebuild its medical facilities; and,

Whereas, The plight of these Americans, and other survivors of the devastating hurricanes, cannot be ignored; and,

Whereas, The federal government has a responsibility to provide assistance and support to these residents that is equivalent to what was provided to survivors of the mainland hurricanes; and,

Whereas, Unfortunately the federal government's response to the disasters in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands to date appears to be underwhelming, especially when it is compared to the support offered to Texas and Florida after they were also hit by hurricanes in 2017; and,

Whereas, For example, although the President visited Texas, Florida and even Puerto Rico within the first few weeks of their damaging hurricanes, he made no such trip to the U.S. Virgin Islands; and,

Whereas, Furthermore, despite Hurricane Maria being the tenth-most intense Atlantic hurricane, a joint investigation by PBS Frontline and NPR showed that the federal government had three times as many people on the ground in Texas and twice as many as in Florida than it did in Puerto Rico, a week after each storm hit; and,

Whereas, This same investigation reported that nine days after each hurricane, there was twice as much water and four times as many meals and tarps distributed by federal officials in Houston and Florida than in Puerto Rico; and,

Whereas, The recovery efforts in Puerto Rico have also been marred by possible criminal behavior on the part of contractors; and,

Whereas, The FBI and other agencies are investigating the \$300 million contract between the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority and Whitefish Energy Holdings to repair the Island's power grid, which was cancelled soon after the specifics of the contract and bid were scrutinized by reporters; and,

Whereas, The lack of a transparent, consistent and coordinated response to the disasters in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands is troubling; and,

Whereas, In June, 2018, New York representatives Congresswoman Nydia Velázquez and Senator Kirsten Gillibrand introduced legislation to establish a national commission to investigate the federal government's disaster relief efforts in Puerto Rico;

Whereas, If it passed, HR. 6103/S. 3076 would have established an eight member panel, with subpoena power, to examine the federal government's preparedness, response, and recovery efforts and how the incredibly low, official death count in Puerto Rico contributed to the inadequate response; and,

Whereas, This type of legislation, with full investigative and subpoena powers, needs to be introduced and passed by the new session of Congress; and,

Whereas, The legislation should also be extended to examine the Federal government's relief efforts in the U.S. Virgin Islands; and,

Whereas, It has been more than a year since Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, and a new hurricane season is underway; and

Whereas, It is imperative that the inadequate and unequal federal relief effort, the lack of transparency, and the unreliable, original death toll in Puerto Rico, finally be addressed; now, therefore, be it

Resolved, That the United States Congress pass, and the President sign, legislation that would establish a national commission on the federal response to the 2017 natural disasters in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands

LS #7374  
1/4/19  
LMS