

Hurricane Maria Recovery Efforts in Puerto Rico & U.S. Virgin Islands

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Transcript

00:00:00:22 [Andy Winkler]: Good afternoon. And thank you for joining our webinar Five Years after Hurricane Maria, a look at recovery efforts in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. I'm Andy Winkler, the Director of BPC's Housing and Infrastructure Project. And I lead our Disaster Response Reform Task Force, which was launched in 2020 to highlight the challenges that the federal government has faced in responding effectively, equitably and impactfully to natural disasters and to make related policy recommendations.

So, the intention behind this webinar had been to discuss the status of recovery efforts nearly five years to the date since Hurricanes Irma and Maria struck and consider some of the lessons that have been learned since reminding us all of the fragility of those efforts and continuing vulnerabilities. Hurricane Fiona made land fall in Puerto Rico over the weekend, bringing heavy rainfall, producing some life threatening, catastrophic flooding, causing an island wide power outage and leaving hundreds of thousands of households without water. Sadly, but understandably, some of the speakers we had invited are unable to participate today as a result. So, we have shortened the program and we'll postpone the panel discussion portion until they can safely participate. We were able to record our discussions late last week with Representatives Jenniffer González Colón of Puerto Rico and Stacey Plaskett of the US Virgin Islands. So, we will go ahead and turn to those now.

Congresswoman Jenniffer González Colón, after many years in politics and public service in Puerto Rico was elected in November 2016 to be Puerto Rico's sole representative in Congress and is the first Latina to hold the office. Importantly, for the purposes of our conversation today, she also served and represented Puerto Rico through one of the worst natural disasters in the island's history, Hurricanes Irma and Maria, working tirelessly to keep attention in Congress on the island's ongoing recovery needs and helping to secure billions of dollars in federal aid to rebuild the islands, money that is still being spent on projects across Puerto Rico.

So, thank you so much for joining us today, Congresswoman. I know we don't have a lot of time, so I am going to jump right in and ask, just five years later after all of the damage that the two hurricanes caused, from taking out the entire electric grid to damaging many, many homes, taking many, many lives. Can you reflect a little bit on where Puerto Rico is today?

00:02:55:01 **[Rep. Jenniffer González Colón]:** Well, first of all, thank you for the opportunity. I think, although it's been almost five years, we moved from recovery to long term rebuilding. And to this day, we still suffer the challenge of it. For example, the power grid on the island is still only barely repaired, not really rebuilt. And that's one of the main issues that the island's still suffering with a lot of power outages every week without a disaster happening on that. And the system is still very vulnerable as well as how the need for widespread restoration in all aspects of our infrastructure creates a high economic stress since it increased demand for materials and skilled labor, and much of the federal programs worked in a reimbursement process. It's not actually giving you the money upfront to rebuild. So that's one of the biggest problems we are facing. So, there's not enough people or resources to rebuild everything at the same time, which raises the cost, even above the general inflation and energy. So, we also continue to deal with that aftermath of displacement of large numbers of families who relocated to continue into states so that children can continue schooling and elders who receive their care. And I think the best way to describe what's happening five years after the hurricane is looking to the Inspector General report, which admits in many ways that in 2017, many parts of FEMA and other agencies were not in position to handle these immediately. And it took the steep curve to make these things happen. Things are getting better. I will say that, but still we haven't used more than 20% of the funds that were allocated to the island.

So, in general, it was no matter of resources, not existing or not been available. What we've formally asked is if we can use all the resources and giving the current procedure. So, add to that earthquake, add to that pandemic and now with inflation. So, there's a lot of things are mixed in this situation. So, the people are frustrated. They hear about billions of dollars being approved for repairs of damage, tens of billions for permanent rebuilding to fix our electrical grid, but they want to see when it's going to happen. So, we maintain a lot of oversight doing hearings here. Actually today, we just got one from transportation and infrastructure going through all those issues with FEMA and the local agencies. And we're going to have another one in that resources committee. So, I'll continue to do oversight of those ones and the recovery process of that.

00:05:56:20 **[Andy Winkler]:** Given that some of the money has gone out and has helped and there are projects on the ground that have developed. But to your point, so much of this has been slow and a lot of projects that are really mission critical for the island's future and for its future resilience, they're not quite there yet. So, I wonder, given climate change, the increasing severity of so many storms in so many parts of the country, severe weather, just where do you think Puerto Rico stands today should it face a very major hurricane? Or are you feeling more prepared or there's still just a lot of work that needs to be done?

00:06:40:11 **[Rep. Jenniffer González Colón]:** A lot of work needs to still to be done. Actually, during this weekend, we are expecting a tropical storm that's called Fiona. And it's in the path of Puerto Rico. We are in a hurricane season until November. So, I do know that the recovery has been real, but too slow in many

cases. And I will say that staff from FEMA and other agencies have been working hard on the ground from the start. For example, major obligations for long term infrastructure rebuilding only begin late 2020. So, a lot of the issues are red tape, not necessarily the staffing from the federal agency. So, people get frustrated at that. And the biggest symbol is the continued inability of the electrical grid. I think that's the most important issue that affects lives in Puerto Rico. They hear about over \$4 billion just for repair of damage and almost \$10 billion obligated to permanent rebuild of the system. But it's not even 10 to 20% that has been dispersed in those areas. So, one of the great challenges we still face is the difficulty and effectively communicating the people, the details of work and money, the changes in guidance terms, changes in personal, in government officials, complicated everything since 2018, 19, 20. With many things, Puerto Rico going on, I think just patching what was broken was not even enough in a short term. If we are ready for a storm, I think now there's more conscious that things need to be repaired soon. And I know all the agencies are working in plans to manage the tropical storm that we may face during this weekend. But I'm really concerned about the vulnerability of the electrical grid system.

00:08:46:29 **[Andy Winkler]:** Well, you have used your position in the House of Representatives to really raise the profile of all of these issues throughout the recovery process, how slow CDBGER has been, how slow some of the FEMA recovery money reimbursements. You've raised these issues throughout your time in Congress. And Congress did respond a little bit recognizing some of the weaknesses in the federal disaster system in passing the Disaster Recovery Reform Act back in 2018. But were those reforms enough? What else are you advocating for? And particularly in the next Congress where you have the prospect of Republican control, maybe in the House, what priorities would you like to see kind of elevated in advance to make this system work better?

00:09:39:27 **[Rep. Jenniffer González Colón]:** I'll tell you that for me, it was a blessing that I did manage the visit of more than a hundred of members of Congress coming to the island, bringing them to the sites to see what was going on. And that helped me a lot during the approval of different bills, allocating funds for the recovery process on the island. And in that aftermath, the slow pace of action, that many areas made clear the processes and the red tape and different provisions. We managed to amend some of them by law as to the staff. I was part of the committee. We actually have one bill that I think will help the process of rebuilding now, which is HR 2017, that tackles the issues of funding, global match and the procurement of projects.

00:10:38:11 **[Rep. Jenniffer González Colón]:** So, I expect that bill to help a lot of the process, not just for Puerto Rico, for the Virgin Islands as well. And we do have a lot of other bills that would not only benefit the island or USVI, but also many other states that were in the process of recovering from a year of numerous consecutive disasters, including Hurricane Harvey, Sandy, and many others. So, we supported other legislation. And some of them already passed the House. HR 539 will be approved. I mean, it will help the agencies to manage when they

actually send an invoice to the people who got affected by hurricanes HR 5343, that will urge demonstrator to submit a report to Congress in terms of issues to the recovery process. And one of that, for me, is important is allowing the public to know where the funds are. Creating a website, knowing where the money is allocated, where it's going to be used and how much it's been dispersed. Those bills are being passed already. So, I think people should know, taxpayers' money, where are they being used. And what's the reason they're still not used as well.

00:12:08:26 [Andy Winkler]: Well, thank you so much for taking the time to talk with us. We are also going to be joined after this by Congresswoman Plaskett to get another perspective on recovery efforts there. But we appreciate your leadership and making the time for us today. Thank you.

00:12:23:11 [Rep. Jenniffer González Colón]: And thank you actually for maintaining the issue of that recovery process, because it's not done. And we cannot allow ourselves to have another hurricane or another disaster on top of those, because it will just damage the expectations of the rebuilding process. But thank you.

00:12:43:06 [Andy Winkler]: Thank you so much. So up next, we are going to have a little conversation with Congresswoman Stacey Plaskett. After many years in public service, similar to Congresswoman González Colón, who we just finished a little conversation with. In the Virgin Islands, she was elected in 2014 to represent the US Virgin Islands in Congress and is now serving her fourth term. We are so thrilled to have you, Congresswoman Plaskett. Thank you for being here. I know you're short on time, so, I'll jump right in and ask my first question, which is essentially just reflecting back on five years ago, the hurricanes, both Irma and Maria hitting the US Virgin Islands causing so much devastation, taking out really critical infrastructure systems, hospitals, nearly 70 to 90% of building damage on some of the islands. Maybe you can just reflect on where the Virgin Islands are today.

00:13:54:16 [Rep. Stacey Plaskett]: Sure. Thanks so much. I really appreciate you checking in and finding out how we're doing, really understanding how the process has moved in the last few years. This is as I'm sure Jenniffer González Colón stated five years now, since the hurricanes struck. And I would just first have people remember that the Virgin Islands are in a very unique position, unlike Puerto Rico, because we had both Irma hit us on September 6th. And then shortly thereafter, Hurricane Maria, both of which hit us as category five hurricanes. And they struck all three of the major islands. Usually what happens is that the hurricanes will hit one island and then the other one can act as a base camp. In these last two hurricanes in 2017, all of our territories were devastated. So, when you talk about public infrastructure, we have to have duplication of services because of the distance between the two islands, St. Croix and St. Thomas. St. John is very close to St. Thomas. And so, they used many of their services, but after those two hurricanes, both of our major hospitals were destroyed. Most schools, over 50 of our public schools had severe damages. Some complete. Children were doing double shifts utilizing the schools that we have. Many of the

kids are still operating through mobile schools that have been put in place. And on St. Croix, we have not even moved into the mobile unit for the hospital. We are just functioning, not at capacity. Our emergency room is operating as an OR. We have very few beds, et cetera, and that's been now for five years. And so, I would say that the pace of recovery has been pretty slow. The impacts range widely and reach broadly, interrupting our basic services, including electricity and water, damaging homes. And those are things that we're still working on. In the Virgin Islands with the portfolio of 1500 projects, over 700 have been completed and 500 or underway. But that's not nearly where we need to be five years later. And with bureaucracy, the way it is, much of that has been slow in happening.

There's been significant progress in advancing the recovery efforts, but the territory remains in a fragile state because of the number of projects that have not. And it would be interesting to have a discussion with you about what's creating that complexity of rebuilding. I think the mere fact that Congress changed the law completely for the Virgin Islands in Puerto Rico and the Stafford Act to allow for resiliency so that we were no longer building as things were at the time of the storm, but building as things should be, have created nuances that I don't think federal government was ready for. And so, the experts in both FEMA and HUD, we're taking them in a new, innovative place that they have not been. And that's caused some real issues in terms of agreement on what rebuild should look like and getting sign off on many of these projects.

00:17:42:13 [Andy Winkler]: So, you raised a couple really good points in which I think Congresswoman González Colón also mentioned about the slowness, the pace of the recovery efforts and how vulnerable that leaves both of you, both Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands to future storms and in the face of increasingly severe weather because of climate change and climate change risks. So, I'm curious, you mentioned for example, 700 of 1500 projects completed, about half. How vulnerable do you see your, you know, the Us Virgin Islands at this moment? And how can we start to address some of those bureaucratic barriers that are preventing the aid that has already been allocated from getting completed, but also, really preparing for future disasters?

00:18:35:01 [Rep. Stacey Plaskett]: Well, let's think about it. Under the Bipartisan Budget Act, which allowed for rebuilding of critical facilities to prevailing industry standard, right? To date, a total of 92 projects have been requested for replacement through FEMA. 46 have been approved five years later, including 17 educational facilities and 8 healthcare facilities. FEMA has just recently approved the replacement of wastewater system and potable water systems for the island of St. Croix. They have not done that as yet for the islands of St. Thomas and St. John. Additionally, the Virgin Islands is not in a position to provide upfront funding for all of these projects, and then go through the back and forth with the federal government before the rebuild. Therefore, it's critical that obligations are online with the actual costs and that those approvals happen quickly.

- 00:19:35:18 So, because now we're saying that those things have been approved, but they haven't been done. Just think about it this weekend, Andy. Tropical storm Fiona is coming through the Virgin Islands. Specifically, they think on Saint Croix. We're prayerful that it will only be rain, but when you have hospitals that have not been replaced, tremendous rain through those hospital systems can cause additional damage as we wait for the rebuild. Everyone just assumes they will not be utilities there. Electricity will go out for several days. The thought will be. And so, individuals have to have generators, et cetera. Thinking about those individuals who rely on electricity for healthcare needs as well. Children will be out of school once again, for additional days. We've had children who were out of school initially at the hurricanes, then the COVID pandemic. We're facing severe mental and social damage to our children because of these outages. And so, like Jenniffer González Colón, I'm very, very concerned about if we don't get these projects moving quickly and get this happening, not only are we going to lose an opportunity that Congress gave us to transform the Virgin Islands, but there will be untold damage in terms of health, as well as educational for the next generation.
- 00:21:06:18 [**Andy Winkler**]: So, you brought up very briefly, COVID 19. And I think when we last spoke two years ago, we were talking about how are the Virgin Islands and other communities going to plan and manage disaster recovery in a COVID setting. I'm curious just how much COVID 19 has exacerbated some of the issues that the island has had and where you stand as the world continues to start to open up. I mean, we are still having this conversation virtually, so we're not exactly where we used to be, but are people coming back? I know tourism is a significant industry, not the only one, but it is important to the US Virgin Islands. Where do you stand economically from five years ago?
- 00:21:53:08 [**Rep. Stacey Plaskett**]: Well, I have to say that I believe that our governor did a tremendous job and his administration, in managing the pandemic. First from a healthcare standpoint, I think Virgin Islanders who are used to situations where government gives mandates because we're used to fragile weather patterns. When the governor says everyone has to go in a lockdown or everyone needs to wear a mask, we need to social distance. It's a life or death. We listen and do that. I don't think we did as well with vaccination due to many social and other issues. However, because we are isolated, that was one way that we were able to support our health needs and did much better in tourism than other Caribbean islands did. Many of them decided to shut down in terms of no one in, no one out, if you were coming in, it was a two-week isolation. The Virgin Islands took a more manageable, I think, posture by saying that if you wanted to come in, you had to have a negative test within a certain time period, which allowed for us to be one of the few places that allowed for tourism to take place, allowed for the marine industry to continue. And we received a benefit for it. While at the same time, the governor and our local legislature really did some bootstrapping and tightening of belts to make sure that we were prepared financially. So, when Congress, my office worked with this administration on the American Rescue Plan, as well as the CARES Act, those funds could be used more creatively because they weren't

needed for loss revenue specifically. And so, I think we're in a better state with that. That's the positive side. The negative of course, is that we don't have trucking. We can't get supplies in any way, except through ships, through airlift. And so, in terms of supply chain, we are very far behind. And so, when we're talking about the rebuild, once again, many of the cost with inflation and supply chain issues that are currently being experienced, the territories at a greater risk for cost overruns for those 428 fixed cost projects that had been approved maybe two years ago or elsewhere.

00:24:22:18 **[Andy Winkler]**: So, I'll ask just one final question. We have seen disaster recovery, disaster assistance as an area of bipartisan collaboration and making changes to the federal aid programs, bipartisan in nature. You saw a lot of changes in the Disaster Recovery Reform Act back in 2018 in part from leadership like yours and Congresswoman González Colón on the House TNI, Transportation and Infrastructure Committee. I know you're now on Ways and Means which also has a really significant profile among house committees. You've created a profile in the House, an outsized one from people in the past, sitting in your seat. For someone from the territories, you've taken on a really significant role in use state to advocate, not just for the Virgin Islands, but for other communities who are really vulnerable to disasters. So, I'm curious, I don't want to prognosticate, but there is a prospect for the House to flip for divided government. But you still have a strong ally in the Biden administration. I'm curious what you see as the prospects looking forward for additional reforms to disaster assistance programs that we clearly know are necessary and needed. And other areas where you might be able to collaborate with your counterparts on the other side of the aisle.

00:25:47:04 **[Rep. Stacey Plaskett]**: This past January in our staff retreat, we talked about developing a closer relationship with the administration, knowing that if, per chance, the House does change, that would be a tremendous avenue for us to continue the progress that we've made by having those relationships in the administration for the two years after that. But Andy, I'm still optimistic about the continued bipartisanship here in the House. Even if it isn't always evident. Just this week, myself and Congressman Garret Graves from Louisiana, many of the members from Louisiana are Republicans, but recognize completely the need for disaster recovery support. And so, he and I worked on together and the House passed overwhelmingly, over 400 members, voting for HR 5774, which is expediting disaster recovery, which is a bipartisan disaster relief bill, which expedites allocation of additional assistance immediately after the storm. Both of us recognizing that FEMA needed an additional stream of funding to cut the federal response time down to a maximum of 30 days for individuals and for local localities that need that money.

And so, I've always been moderate Democrat. I'm a member of the new dem coalition and believe in working across the aisle, believe that government needs to be streamlined to support people, working on economic recovery, economic

development. And I think that there's going to always continue to be members on both sides of the aisle that are willing to do that.

00:27:39:29 [Andy Winkler]: Well, representing the Bipartisan Policy Center, we are thrilled to hear that. And thank you so much for your time and your leadership on these issues. We really appreciate you joining us today. After this, I'm going to turn it over to my colleague Owen Minott who's a senior policy analyst at BPC to lead a panel discussion. Thank you so much, Congresswoman.

00:28:01:05 [Owen Minott]: Thanks Andy. My name is Owen Minnot, and I'm a senior policy analyst for BPC's Housing and Infrastructure Project. And I want to thank Representative González Colón and Representative Plaskett again for taking the time out of their busy schedules to speak with us. As both Congresswomen made clear, five years nearly to the day after Hurricane Maria brought devastation to the Caribbean, too little progress has been made and key vulnerabilities remain.

As we mentioned at the start, we had planned a panel discussion to talk more in detail about the status of Maria recovery efforts, but we've had to postpone that portion of the event because our guest experts in Puerto Rico are unavailable due to the current storm. But we're hoping to reschedule this discussion. So, stay tuned.

Meanwhile, BPC's Disaster Response Reform Task Force will also continue our work to enhance the impact and efficiency of disaster assistance funding with the goal of helping communities in crisis rebound after natural disasters, stronger than before. Most importantly, we are hoping everyone stays safe and wishing for a speedy recovery from the storm.

And with that today's event has come to a close. Thank you, everyone, for joining us.