



Governor of Puerto Rico
WANDA VÁZQUEZ GARCED

July 20, 2020

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker of the House
U.S. House of Representatives
H-232, The Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
United States Senate
S-230, The Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Democratic Leader
United States Senate
S-221, The Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Republican Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
H-204, The Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Speaker Pelosi, Majority Leader McConnell, Democratic Leader Schumer, and Republican Leader McCarthy:

As our nation continues to combat the unprecedented COVID-19 global pandemic, its effects have devastated Puerto Rico's already fragile local economy, which is still recovering from two major disasters: Hurricanes Irma and María in the fall of 2017, and the earthquakes that affected the southern part of the island earlier this year. After three years of unfortunate and unpredictable events, Puerto Rico's economic capacity to continue battling the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic is steep and uphill.

While this crisis has exhausted local resources, the impact on Puerto Rican families experiencing poverty and food insecurity is immense. As such, I write to request swift congressional action to provide an additional \$1.236 billion for Puerto Rico's Nutritional Assistance Program (NAP) so that we can meet the increased demand for nutritional assistance caused by COVID-19 and the resulting effects it has had on our economy.

In 2017, Hurricanes Irma and María vastly exacerbated Puerto Rico's food insecurity. As part of the federal response to that mass devastation, Congress provided two disaster relief NAP appropriations for Puerto Rico, an initial \$1.27 billion in the immediate aftermath of the hurricanes and an additional \$600 million in June 2019, which allowed us to provide critical nutrition assistance to an additional 153,000 beneficiaries. Due to the severity and magnitude of the Coronavirus pandemic, I have issued multiple executive orders to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 to save lives, protect public health and safety, and lessen the threat of a greater disaster in Puerto Rico. As a result, many Puerto Ricans are temporarily unemployed and unable to afford basic needs, increasing NAP participants by 187,040 and bringing our total NAP number of enrolled beneficiaries to more than 1.487 million individuals.

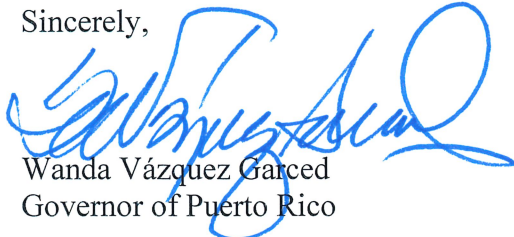
Despite all the extraordinary measures taken by the U.S. Congress and my Administration to provide our citizens with adequate nutrition assistance during these trying times, Puerto Rico is on the cusp of a nutrition assistance cliff. Absent congressional action by July 31, 2020, Puerto Rico will be forced to reduce or eliminate NAP benefits for approximately 187,040 beneficiaries because we will have exhausted all emergency federal NAP funding provided by previous COVID-19 supplementals. It will also force a reduction in benefits for the NAP participants who were eligible before the COVID-19 crisis, bringing instability to an already highly vulnerable population who are still recovering from previous disasters. Therefore, the additional \$1.236 billion in NAP funding will allow the Government of Puerto Rico to provide continued NAP benefits to our most vulnerable populations for another year while we work to recover from the economic distress COVID-19 continues to cause.

Furthermore, I write to express my full support for the Equitable Nutrition Assistance for the Territories Act of 2020 (H.R. 6846; S. 677) and the Closing the Gap Act of 2020 (S. 3719), legislation that would address Puerto Rico's nutrition disparities by transitioning the island, and other territories, into the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). The need for congressional action to provide Puerto Rico increased NAP funding whenever disaster strikes show the necessity of transitioning Puerto Rico from NAP to SNAP. Ensuring equal treatment in federal food nutrition assistance to mitigate food insecurity is particularly crucial for Puerto Rico, given the island's high poverty rates and fewer programs to help low-income families meet basic needs. Over two-fifths of all residents of Puerto Rico (43 percent) and half of our children in (57 percent) lived in poverty in 2018. Because of our unequal territorial status, Puerto Rico receives less funding in other vital socio-economic security programs than other states, making fewer federal resources available to meet our residents' basic needs.

Low-income families and communities in Puerto Rico deserve access to nutrition assistance that responds quickly and effectively to the food insecurity resulting from continued economic hardships, two hurricanes, ongoing earthquakes, and now the COVID-19 pandemic. As a matter of equity, U.S. citizens on the island should receive the same nutrition assistance benefit levels as if they resided on the U.S. mainland or in any other SNAP jurisdiction. Puerto Rico's recent struggles make any further delay in providing Puerto Rico access to SNAP unconscionable.

Thank you in advance for your attention to this request. If you have any questions or require additional information, please do not hesitate to reach out to Jennifer M. Storipan, Esq., Executive Director of the Puerto Rico Federal Affairs Administration at 202-778-0710 or jstoripan@prfaa.pr.gov.

Sincerely,



Wanda Vázquez Garced
Governor of Puerto Rico

cc: Rep. Jenniffer González-Colón
Hon. Orlando López Belmonte, Secretary, Puerto Rico Department of Family