



Congressional Field Hearing  
Earle B. Ottley Legislative Hall  
Testimony: Senator Janelle K. Sarauw  
March 12, 2018

Please find this document, my written testimony as it relates to the relief and recovery in the territory, post Hurricanes Irma and Maria.

On September 6, 2017 Hurricane Irma struck the United States Virgin Islands with such severe force, that the hurricane itself no longer registered on the Saffir-Simpson Scale. Entire homes, schools and government buildings were destroyed, the sole hospital in St. Thomas and clinic in St. John was destroyed, our communication infrastructure was severely damaged, and most unfortunately, lives were lost.

Although somewhat comforted by the commitment and provision of the Federal Government's assistance, what we found immediately post storm, left cause for some concern. With two distribution sites initially open, panic among the residents compounded when the food provision did not include provisions for babies, infants or toddlers, seniors, nor special needs/persons with diet restrictions. In fact, the high sodium and high sugar contents for a population without adequate access to medical care facilities, was very concerning. This left no choice but for members of this community, my office included, to begin to take up the charge and run logistics to get proper aid into the territory via private means. One example, is that my office chartered a private boat to retrieve food and medical supplies from a private entity in Puerto Rico, and even ice from our sister island of St. Croix, to distribute to residents on the island of St. Thomas.

The island of St. John was in probably even more of a dire situation. There was no communication between islands because of the limited communication service. But there was also no transportation as the ports remained close for a number of days (St. John's accessibility is by boat/ferry). And so for the first few days post storm, St. John was pretty much on their own for survival.

In addition, as there were continuous rain systems following the storm, the initial distribution of tarpaulin was almost non-existent and when the tarps were distributed, the dimensions were too small. And so residents who were trying to salvage what was left of their homes and its contents' were meet with grave despair, especially when less than two weeks after Hurricane Irma, Hurricane Maria came to bore down on the U.S. Virgin Islands again, St. Croix receiving the brunt of this storm, and St. Thomas and St. John's infrastructure already compromised.

As this storm also ravished Puerto Rico, who for the most part becomes the storing hub for the Virgin Islands goods, immediate aid into the territory moved at a pace that was less than desirable. Even machinery to clear roads and the like appeared a stalled ordeal.

As a resilient people, the Virgin Islands community bolstered together, helped out their neighbors, began to clear debris and shared what little food was on island [some grocery stores were damaged, and with ports closed, those that remained had limited inventory in short order].

Nonetheless, recovery ensued, and aid began to become more organized. The ports eventually were opened and families were able to receive aid directly from their loved ones living in the mainland. This office along with many others continued to network to receive and distribute aid. Assessments began to take place.

Now, six months after the first hurricane, three months before the start of hurricane season 2018, the Virgin Islands is in a very precarious situation. Still without completed assessments, no modular hospital or schools or otherwise temporary structures have been erected to date. That means that many of our territory's medical evacuees are still in the mainland without family and a high level of uncertainty [41 medical evacuees have expired since being transferred] and schools scheduled to resume after summer break may still have to partake in split session. FEMA assistance as it relates to damaged homes have left many in a state of disarray. To date there still remains too many residents awaiting feedback from adjusters for their insurance claims. Many residents, seniors in particular who received little to no assistance and referred to the SBA loan program are left trying to figure out how, why and when will they begin to assemble a place to live.

We know that the territory has to rebuild a more resilient infrastructure and the devastation, as terrible as it was, has brought about the opportunity to do just that. This means however that the rebuild is not immediate and in the interim the people of the Virgin Islands, U.S. citizens, require some reprieve and require it more expeditiously. A victim of climate change, we anticipate more severe and frequent storms in our region. We do not have the luxury of driving to another state when these natural events occur, nor do we necessarily desire to. But we do want to be able to have a level of comfort and solace, knowing that adequate and timely aid and assistance is available to us from our Federal Partners, and that the urgency of now is understood when dealing with lives-children, seniors.

Although nature has rebounded, and our hills are as lush as they ever were, our waters a pristine turquoise, and the cruise ships have resume calls to our ports, many in the Virgin Islands are still struggling on a daily basis to meet their basic needs. With three months approaching the next hurricane season, the partnership between our local government and that of our Federal government, should provide for our residents a sense of hope and not anxiety.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak on behalf of the people of the United States Virgin Islands – United in Pride and Hope. God Bless America and God Bless the United States Virgin Islands.