



CONGRESSWOMAN JENNIFFER GONZÁLEZ-COLÓN

PUERTO RICO - AT LARGE

Hearing Remarks

H.R. 1126 - Vieques Recovery and Redevelopment Act

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for this hearing on the Vieques Recovery and Redevelopment Act of 2021. This is an important step towards improving the situation of an American community who helped secure our defense for many years.

The Bill, which I first presented in the last Congress as HR 4605 and now in this Congress as HR 1126, sets up a process for claims and compensation for health conditions in the Island Municipality of Vieques.

The U.S. Navy maintained a presence on Vieques for six decades during which American and Allied forces used the island as a training and test range, operating multiple kinds of equipment and weaponry. To this day the Navy and other agencies are engaged in a cleanup so extensive that the latest GAO report (which I ask to introduce for the Record) indicates it will last until 2032. In the 2019 National Defense Authorization Act, myself and Representative Ocasio-Cortez included amendments for the application of improved technologies in that cleanup effort (which I also introduce for the Record). But at the same time the residents continue extremely worried as to how that affects their health, in the face of studies and personal experience reflecting higher incidence of many medical conditions.

The people of Vieques served their country, helping make America strong: they deserve their country's help to make themselves strong again. Today Vieques Mayor José Corcino joins us to speak for them.

Even prior to Hurricane Maria, Vieques had a limited capacity health care facility, and residents needed to travel off-island for many medical services. The Hurricane destroyed the clinic, and although FEMA finally released the funds for rebuilding last year, the people's concern is: when we get a new building, what will we do with it?

Because transport between Vieques and the main island of Puerto Rico by ferry service has a record of frequent disruption, the Viequenses want a medical facility that can address both chronic and acute cases and the need for life-saving medical services to its residents.

This is a goal of this bill, beyond individual compensation. Under its provisions, a "Special Master" appointed by the U.S. Attorney General would evaluate claims validity and compensation. Claims from individuals would be documented as to the nature of the case, and their compensations could be up to \$110,000 depending on the conditions.

The Special Master will also evaluate any compensation to the municipality of Vieques for expenses incurred, and facilitate resources to upgrade the staff and equipment at the medical center to provide full-service regular pediatric and adult care, and care for conditions such as metals toxicity, cancer and diabetes, and transport and telemedicine costs during the upgrade.

Acceptance of the compensation will be considered a settlement of claims by the individual or by the Municipality.

The Special Master would be also authorized to select an academic partner to conduct further studies and outreach to evaluate strategies for better identifying causes and solutions for the environmental and health conditions in Vieques, including upgrading the power grid.

Funding would proceed from the "Judgment Fund" under section 1304 of title 31, U.S. Code, not out of new appropriation, which is why the bill is also referred to the Judiciary Committee.

The nation benefitted from the sacrifice of those who lived and are living on Vieques and we must recognize that and show them the respect and appreciation they deserve. We will hear today from those who know about this issue the closest. Let us listen to their voices.