

**Written Testimony of Myrna Pagán, leader of “Vidas Viequenses Valen”  
Before the U.S. House of Representative Natural Resources Committee on  
H.R. 1317 Vieques Recovery and Redevelopment Act of 2021**

**June 30, 2021**

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Thank you, Chairman Grijalva, Ranking Member Westerman, and members of the House Natural Resources Committee for the opportunity to share my thoughts on this very important bill. My name is Myrna Pagán and I speak to you as a proud Viequense mother, *abuelita*, and soon to be great-grandmother. I also represent the non-for-profit organization “Vidas Viequenses Valen,” or Vieques Lives Matter.

Our “Isla Nena,” as it is affectionately called, is the perfect place to live off the land and the sea. It is the place where I have seen my children grow. Life in Vieques is almost utopic, except that there is a constant shadow lurking and threatening to take away the joys of a simple life. Why, you might be wondering? Well, our people live in the constant fear of developing cancer or strange diseases.

For more than six decades Vieques served as a military training ground for bombing and experimentation with nonconventional weapons by the US Military along with the militaries of other countries that rented our little island for training, contaminating our skies, our land, our sea and our people. The consequences of these practices have been alarmingly higher rates of cancer, cardiac dysfunction and cerebral vascular disease which plague us to this day because it is in our food sources.

When I was diagnosed with uterine cancer, I decided to have all my family members do heavy metal testing. The results were alarming. Every single member of our three generations were contaminated at toxic levels. I survived cancer. My husband, Charlie, did not. We lost our son, Derek, at the young age of thirty-two because of liver failure. One of my grandchildren was born with several anomalies and another with Kostmann's syndrome, rare immune disorder. I have nine grandchildren and all of them have respiratory problems. Sadly, my story is not a unique one.

We, the people of Vieques, suffer an acute health crisis. Every family I know has someone one with cancer or has lost someone with cancer.

Being sick in Vieques is a daunting challenge. For medical treatment we must travel to the big island and we depend on a maritime transportation system that more often than not fails to provide reliable service. When it does work, it takes us an hour to travel to the coastal town of Ceiba. Then we take an expensive taxi ride to San Juan and either have to pay a hotel or sleep at friends' or relatives' houses unless we can make it back to the ferry. If we make it back after chemo, it is a very nauseating ride. In addition, expecting mothers face similar difficulties, as they cannot give birth in Vieques, due to the lack of a maternity ward.

Many of our patients forego treatment because of this excruciating ordeal. The situation is dire, given there has been no facility in Vieques since 2017 when Hurricane María devastated our island. Even before the hurricane, the only health center on the island did not have the adequate equipment to treat dialysis nor cancer patients nor most of the illnesses we face.

We lack the most basic requirements to meet the health needs of our people. We lack what every American has living in the most rural parts of the Country. Currently, there is a provisional health center but there is no birthing room, no x-ray service, and only meager medical emergency triage services are available. Viequenses are constantly struggling for life. At the start of the pandemic, while the rest of the country was worried about having enough respirators or nurses, we knew that if we got serious Covid we had no chance to survive.

Our children are struggling for life. Jaideliz Moreno-Ventura, a 13-year-old child who was convulsing and lacking oxygen died January 12, 2020, in the provisional health clinic. Life saving measures and CPR were administered manually for hours by paramedics and family members for lack of a mechanical respirator. Her death was in part due to the non-existent pediatric protocols and because of the lack of protocol for the management of critical life-threatening emergencies requiring immediate transfer to adequate facilities in the main island of Puerto Rico. Jaideliz's death affected all of us. This situation should not have happened. Period.

The story repeated itself this year. Last month, a three-year-old suffered the consequences of the lack of an adequate health center on our island. After being treated at the provisional clinic in Vieques, the minor was referred to a hospital on the main island. However, the child's condition worsened on the way to the main island, and he passed away. We should not be mourning the loss of our children. This should not have happened once, much less twice.

We have a duty to our children and the future generations to finally bring a just conclusion to this period in our history. The U.S. government, through the superfund site, has already started the process of removing the unexploded ordnance from our island. So far, they have removed some 5 million pounds of explosives a year and have collected more than 144,000 munitions. However, the cleanup has been far too slow and has not begun in the sea. The unexploded bombs are being removed in case someone steps on them but the residue, the lead, the mercury, the arsenic, the cadmium and uranium and all of the chemicals are not being removed.

The Vieques Recovery and Redevelopment Act of 2021(H.R. 1317) is a comprehensive solution that would make many of these problems much better. Aside from providing just compensation to the Viequeses who have suffered specific chronic or life-threatening diseases that resulted from the military contamination, this legislation would also commission scientific research to determine the best strategies for addressing and resolving the environmental and health concerns that impact our community. We must stop this vicious cycle of illness that comes from the contamination. This bipartisan bill would not only provide monetary compensation, but it would also help address the health crisis our "Isla Nena" is facing.

We, the people of Vieques, need a proper hospital that treats cancer, diabetes, kidney diseases, and all the other illnesses that have gravely impacted our underserved people. This bill does precisely that. Through a special master, this bipartisan legislation helps us build a facility that addresses our humanitarian health crisis.

I yearn for a future where our children live without the constant fear of developing a serious illness because of factors beyond their control. We, the people of Vieques, only dream of a

reality where having access to proper healthcare does not mean we have to leave our home-island. We do want to leave this horrible chapter of our history behind, and this bill is an important step towards doing so.

If passed, the Vieques Recovery and Redevelopment Act would provide a unique opportunity to transform the way our people face chronic illness, and ultimately, our daily lives. We want hope for our families. We want this horrible period in our history, to be just that, a period in history. This bill helps bring that day much closer.

Members of the committee, this concludes my statement. I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.

Thank you.