



**GOVERNMENT OF PUERTO RICO**  
OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

**Statement of Governor Pedro Pierluisi, Puerto Rico**  
**U.S. House of Representatives**  
**Committee on Oversight and Government Reform Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis**  
**“The Successes and Challenges that States and Territories Have Faced in Responding to the**  
**Pandemic, and the Ongoing Public Health Response”**  
**January 20, 2022**

Chairman Clyburn, Ranking Member Scalise, and Members of the Subcommittee: Thank you for inviting me to testify on the challenges that the states and territories have faced, and continue to face, in response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. As Governor and former Resident Commissioner in Congress, I am honored to represent the unique viewpoint of the island’s 3.2 million American Citizens as we enter the third year of this pandemic.

I plan to outline Puerto Rico’s distinct health care challenges in responding to this crisis. I will highlight the ways in which Puerto Rico’s leaders worked closely with the Federal Government and health care providers on the island to obtain adequate supply of vaccines, medical treatments, and diagnostic tests for our people, despite national supply issues at times. As Governor, I must also take this opportunity to underline Puerto Rico’s long-standing inequitable treatment under federal health care programs. Such inequitable treatment continues to handicap our health care system, including our response to the pandemic, as we strive to provide the best care for our citizens.

When COVID-19 first struck the U.S., many of the most vulnerable communities in Puerto Rico were still recovering from the Category 5 hurricane that devastated our Island in 2017, Hurricane Maria, and from the January 2020 earthquakes that ravaged areas in the southwest of the Island. While power and water shortages affected the island, doctors left Puerto Rico in great numbers. I must also mention that citizens in Puerto Rico suffer disproportionately from chronic conditions, such as diabetes and heart disease. As we have seen throughout the COVID-19 crisis, these conditions were among those that led to high levels of morbidity throughout the United States and its territories.

When my Administration took office in January of 2021, I put together a team of highly qualified professionals and scientists to advise me and our Health Department to lead our fight against COVID-19. We worked tirelessly to educate our citizens on the value of the vaccine, which bolstered vaccine uptake and staved off skepticism. Because of these efforts, our island saw one of the highest rates of vaccination in the U.S. Over 91.4 percent of our vaccine-eligible population over the age of 5 have received at least one dose, and an astounding 81.5 percent of our vaccine eligible population are fully vaccinated or boosted.

An important aspect of Puerto Rico’s successful vaccine rollout was the connectivity amongst the health care providers on the island. When monoclonal antibody treatments became widely available, thanks to the hard work of HHS, Puerto Rico leaned heavily on our strong pharmacy networks to ensure that there was a coordinated request for therapeutics needed each week. Puerto Rico’s Secretary of Health, Dr. Carlos Mellado, and our Innovation and Technology Service Director led the efforts to engineer one of the first electronic vaccine card programs in the United States, the VacuID. Dr. Mellado also deployed strong contact tracing teams and effectively monitored visitors, identified positive COVID patients and slowed the

spread. These efforts enabled us to sustain much of our tourism industry, an important component of Puerto Rico’s economy.

While Puerto Rico originally experienced difficulty in supplying HHS our comprehensive vaccination data, we have largely rectified this issue and continue to work with the agency and Congress to reflect our impressive vaccination rates. We thank HHS and Congress for their assistance as we strive reflecting the true rates of vaccination on our island and stand as a leader in the nation’s vaccination effort.

Puerto Rico worked to distribute Congressionally appropriated relief funds efficiently and equitably, while closely documenting every penny to ensure seamless communication with federal auditors. Despite unequal funding from the provider relief fund, Puerto Rico was able to achieve the near-impossible: having no hospitals closing their doors during the COVID-19 pandemic.

<b>Legislative Funding Package</b>	<b>Amount (Millions)</b>
Phase 1: Preparedness and Response Supplemental Appropriations Act	\$8
Phase 2: Families First Coronavirus Response Act	\$104
Phase 3: Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act	\$2,283
Phase 3.5: April 2020 Package	\$484
<b>Subtotal Fiscal Policy Action</b>	<b>\$2,879</b>
Estimated Monetary Policy Actions	\$4,000
<b>Estimated Total Impact</b>	<b>\$6,879</b>

Puerto Rico is regularly asked to “do more with less.” However, with the right leadership and depoliticization of health care, our island stands as proof that it is possible to achieve successful outcomes. We can only envision just how resilient our small island could be if there was less disparity in federal funding for our health care programs. When treated equally with the states, as we have been for much of the COVID-related distributions, Puerto Rico has been able to accomplish a high standard of care for the citizens of our territory.

Over the last two years, while cases have spiked in the U.S. and around the world, we have been able to keep Puerto Rico’s case counts comparatively low. However, with the rise of the Delta variant and the Omicron variant, we have seen the highest case counts reported to date. We have had [238,913] total cases recorded on the island, with our daily case count continuing to decline at [1,983] cases recorded per day. Throughout the pandemic, we have had [3,511] confirmed deaths due to COVID-19, with our daily average continuing to decrease at [14] recorded per day. These numbers are comparatively low due to our high rates of vaccination. However, given that we are an Island, the possibility of overburdening our health system has always been a concern, as our people cannot be diverted to a neighboring state hospital.

My administration has been very proactive and creative with mandates throughout this pandemic. Since mid-summer of 2021, we have required most of our workforce to be fully vaccinated. Although we have always given our citizens the option to provide negative COVID test results in lieu of proof of vaccination, we have continuously advocated for vaccination across all sectors of our society. In addition, we have not been shy about requiring restaurants and bars to ask for proof of vaccination or a negative test results to their clients at all times. And every time we have faced spikes in cases, upon being hit by the Alpha, Delta and Omicron variants, we have promptly restricted both capacity and business hours at our gastronomic and entertainment venues.

As the U.S.'s most populous territory, Puerto Rico's differential treatment in federal health care programs creates gaps in the services we can provide our citizens. While Congress has passed legislation to increase Puerto Rico's federal medical assistance percentage (FMAP) in Medicaid from 55 percent up to 76 percent, that number has been allowed to lapse since the December 3 Continuing Resolution (CR). This unanticipated reversion to a lower FMAP percentage has triggered severe consequences on the island, potentially causing newly enrolled Medicaid beneficiaries to lose their health coverage if this is not addressed. I urge this subcommittee to work with your colleagues in Congress to reestablish Puerto Rico's 76 percent FMAP as the February 18 government funding deadline approaches. I stand before you today to underscore that if Puerto Rico's FMAP is not fixed, Puerto Rico's health care system will continue to be overburdened. This will lead to significant financial troubles that will have to be confronted by Congress down the road.

In summary, even before Hurricane Maria and COVID-19, Puerto Ricans faced difficulty accessing health care on the island, in large part due to the aforementioned disparities in funding for federal programs, our ongoing health provider exodus, and infrastructure shortages.

Thanks to the continued efforts of Congress and the current administration, such as the funding appropriated to aid our COVID-19 response effort and increases in Medicaid funding, Puerto Rico has been on a long path to resilience. The significant improvements in program integrity across all of Puerto Rico's health care programs hinge upon the continued promise of support from Congress. Sustained progress is made difficult by short-term or altogether insufficient funding. I mention this because it emphasizes the mountain, we in Puerto Rico must climb when responding to any health crisis, even before we face the crisis itself. We must lift ourselves to equal footing with states that have just as many American citizens to care for.

Puerto Rico readily awaits the approval of more therapeutics for COVID-19 patients, a crucial piece sustaining hospital bed availability for the most vulnerable patients. Where safe and effective, we anticipate this being yet another positive example of teamwork with HHS. We continue to do "more with less" with our interconnected health care programs, but I stress that our effort will eventually fall short if we do not find a way to rectify the disparities in federal programs like Medicaid and Medicare.

We look forward to working closely with Congress, as well as the Biden-Harris Administration, to ensure that we equitably distribute every dollar possible to keep our health care system afloat. I assure you that with the proper investment, Puerto Rico can prosper and continue to provide Americans a safe place to invest in, visit, and live.

Our partnership with the Federal Government and Congress will be crucial to our success in creating the best outcomes possible with the resources we have. I thank you for your time and for having me here today. Your support got us this far in our fight against COVID-19 and I have no doubt that it will see us out of this harrowing pandemic. Thank you, and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

