



CONGRESSWOMAN JENNIFFER GONZÁLEZ-COLÓN

PUERTO RICO - AT LARGE

STATEMENT BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
MEMBER DAY HEARING
TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 10, 10:00 AM

Thank you, Chairman Takano and Ranking Member Roe.

I appreciate the opportunity to discuss some of the issues currently impacting the veteran population in Puerto Rico.

As you now, Puerto Rico continues to recover from the 2017 hurricane season. All my constituents struggled with the aftermath, including our veteran community. We have a single medical center located in San Juan, and a network of clinics, including one in the municipalities of Arecibo and Ponce, which were particularly damaged after Hurricane Maria. I am pleased to see the VA is on track to reestablish services in these facilities, and I would like to continue working with the Committee to ensure it maintains

construction work at a steady pace so that these clinics are ready to receive veteran patients as soon as possible.

Another area I would like to enlist the Committee's help is hurricane preparedness. I commend VA staff in Puerto Rico for undertaking the monumental task of serving veterans after Hurricane Maria. Yet, I also recognize there is always room for improvement.

For example, some VA facilities in Puerto Rico receive medication from Florida. Additionally, some medication is shipped directly to veterans from South Carolina. As we have seen with Hurricane Dorian, both states are susceptible to storms during the hurricane season and this can potentially cause medication shortages for veterans on the island. I therefore urge the consideration of alternatives, like utilizing medical supply vendors located in Puerto Rico, to minimize the impact of interrupted services due to hurricanes in other areas.

Keep in mind that this would place the Medical Center in Puerto Rico in a better position to help veterans in other impacted areas.

We also need to focus on making sure our veterans are well informed about the benefits available to them. For example, a constant source of complaints from veterans is provider shortages. As you know, shortages can delay appointments with a specialist. Veterans have options that allow them to see an outside provider should the VA not have the services they need available.

However, I am finding that some veterans remain uninformed of this and other benefits available to them. I therefore urge the Committee to continue working with VSOs and ensure VA facilities properly educate our veterans and their family members on their benefits, like for example those included in the MISSION Act.

I would also like to urge the Committee to help us address a similar problem consisting of vacancies within the VA. During this Congress,

I reintroduced H.R. 846, the Veterans Serving Veterans Act, which passed the House under suspension during the 115th Congress, and H.R. 2308, to amend the Veterans Healing Veterans Scholarship Program to include medical schools in Puerto Rico and one in Texas. Both bills would help veterans find jobs, while also mitigating staff shortages across the VA. I would like to respectfully request that we continue working together to move these bills forward, along with any other initiative you believe could be helpful on these issues.

Lastly, I introduced H.R. 2171 to extend TRICARE Prime to military retirees in the island. I understand this is not under the VA Committee's jurisdiction, but it is an issue that challenges services available to veterans and their dependents on the island. Your support would be greatly appreciated.

I want to thank you both for all the help and attention given to Puerto Rico after the 2017 hurricanes. Your visits to the island remind

veterans that they are being heard and that we are working to meet their needs.

Thank you and I yield back.