

*Examining HHS's Public Health  
Preparedness for and Response to the 2017 Hurricane Season  
Opening Statement for Representative Griffith*

We are here today to examine the Department of Health and Human Services' public health preparedness for and response to the 2017 hurricane season.

In the last two months, Texas, Florida, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands have been devastated by hurricanes. I first want to express our heartfelt sorrow for the millions of Americans impacted by these devastating storms and say that all Members of this Committee on both sides of the aisle stand with those affected by the hurricanes.

I would also like to thank Dr. Burgess and Dr. Ruiz, both members of this subcommittee, who each recently visited Puerto Rico to assess the impact these hurricanes have had, and continue to have, on our fellow Americans.

This Committee has been conducting oversight of the federal response to the recent hurricanes since shortly after Harvey made landfall in Texas. Unfortunately, I expect that our work here will continue for years to come. The Committee's jurisdiction involves not just the public health issues we will be discussing today, but also rebuilding the electrical grid, addressing environmental cleanup, and restoring telecommunications, to name only a few.

The people of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands continue to face a long road to recovery and many are living without power and running water. We are joined today by Representative Jenniffer González-Colón from Puerto Rico--someone who knows all too well about the difficult challenges her home is facing. Thank you for being here for this important hearing.

From coordinating the overall federal health care response, to ensuring that individuals have the medical treatment they need, to protecting the blood and pharmaceutical supply, to granting emergency waivers, and everything in between, HHS has been working tirelessly to provide medical care and services to individuals affected by the storms.

The overwhelming majority of health care facilities in the impacted areas went above and beyond to protect and treat those in harm's way. Yet, media reports indicate that some health care providers failed in their duty to protect their patients. There was a tragic situation at a nursing home in Florida where fourteen residents died after the facility lost its air conditioning—and this despite a hospital across the street that never lost power or cooling.

The response in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands has involved numerous federal agencies, working together with each other and state and local officials. For example, before Hurricane Maria made landfall in Puerto Rico and every day since, HHS, the Department of Defense, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency, or FEMA, have been coordinating with local emergency response officials to provide medical care and help re-establish the island's health care infrastructure. HHS has worked with Puerto Rico's Department of Health to prioritize resources needed for dialysis facilities and has coordinated with FEMA to help ensure critical supplies are delivered where they are needed. Similar efforts are ongoing in the U.S. Virgin Islands, too.

But many questions remain. Has the inter-agency response been effective, from the perspective of HHS? Are federal policies causing delays in response efforts? Are we utilizing our resources in the most efficient and effective ways to help our fellow Americans in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands in particular?

Finally, it is critical that we understand the public health challenges ahead. Mold formation is likely in nearly all the affected regions. As we have seen after Hurricane Harvey, there is an increased risk for the spread of infectious disease due to contaminated water. Media reports indicate that one month after Hurricane Maria, over one million Americans are still without clean, safe drinking water.

Rebuilding Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands will take years. The health care systems are in dire condition and most of the operational facilities need some degree of assistance. To make matters worse, the electrical grid has been devastated which has significantly hampered recovery efforts. We still don't even know the full extent of the damage—let alone when our fellow citizens will have electricity and running water restored. We are trying to make sure we are doing everything possible to address the short- and long-term needs of those living in the areas impacted by Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria, especially in the face of the public health threats that have resulted—and will continue to result—from these storms.

I would like to thank the witnesses for testifying here today and I look forward to hearing your testimony.