

Pallone Opening Remarks at Hearing on Hurricane Response

Oct 24, 2017

Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this hearing on this critical issue. I hope that this hearing is the first of many hurricane related hearings, as Congress needs to hear further from HHS and other agencies regarding the ongoing response and recovery efforts in all of the affected areas.

I also would like to take a moment to recognize the federal, state, and local responders who are working hard to address the many public health issues which exist as response and recovery continues in all of the areas that were impacted by these three major hurricanes.

I know firsthand of the tragic devastation caused by such immense natural disasters. In 2012, my district was hit hard by Hurricane Sandy. I had never seen worse storm damage in our area in my lifetime. For many, the storm was a worst case scenario: lives lost, homes flooded, and businesses lost.

Our nation is now experiencing historic levels of destruction and loss in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, as well as in Florida, Texas and all along the Gulf Coast in the wake of Hurricanes Maria, Irma, and Harvey.

No two natural disasters are alike, and the areas affected by these massive hurricanes have unique needs and challenges. While Congress continues to address the response in Florida and Texas, we must also work to ensure that Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands receive the full and immediate support of the federal government as they recover.

While I recognize that there are a number of ongoing challenges facing the residents of South Florida and the Gulf Coast, much of the hearing today will likely need to address the situation in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The reports coming from these areas indicate that hundreds of thousands of Americans continue to struggle to meet day-to-day needs.

I am particularly concerned that there are still reports that residents do not have access to food or medicine and as many as a million Americans lack access to reliable sources of clean water.

Accounts from the areas affected by these storms paint a dire situation that completely contradict the often rosy stories that come from the White House. Hurricanes Irma and Maria caused widespread flooding and destruction in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, including critical damage to electrical grids, telecommunications systems, drinking water systems, and transportation infrastructure.

Virtually all residents of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands have been impacted, and these infrastructure failures create acute public health issues. We have seen and heard reports of death, dehydration, and desperation as residents of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin islands continue to struggle in a post-apocalyptic landscape where fundamental health needs

remain unaddressed even a month after Hurricane Maria and almost two months after Hurricane Irma.

The list of serious needs and challenges is long. Many hospitals still do not have reliable power. Many communities in Puerto Rico still lack safe drinking water, and people have resorted to drinking from questionable water sources. Where water service has been restored, residents are still unsure if the water is safe. In a recent EPA briefing to the Committee, we learned that crews going into communities to test for water quality were arriving only to find that people still lacked adequate food and drinking water.

Congress must provide ongoing support in the aftermath of these hurricanes to restore and rebuild. I hope that our witnesses today will help us understand what needs to be improved in the response and recovery efforts, so that Congress can more effectively provide assistance and understand the impacts on public health, not just today but in the months and years to come.

Thank you, I yield back.