

ONE HUNDRED SIXTEENTH CONGRESS
Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND COMMERCE

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October 3, 2019

The Honorable Gene L. Dodaro
Comptroller General
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro:

I am writing to request that you undertake an investigation of the months-long communications failures in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands following Hurricane Maria in 2017.

The resiliency and reliability of our communications infrastructure is critical for keeping our residents informed and safe. Recent hurricanes, such as Hurricane Dorian, are a stark reminder of the destruction these natural disasters can have on communications networks, and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) response to Hurricane Maria continues to raise serious questions about the state of our communications infrastructure.

On September 17, 2017, Hurricane Maria battered the United States territories of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, causing great physical harm to its residents and severely damaging the islands' critical infrastructure, including its communications networks. The day after Hurricane Maria made landfall, 95 percent of the cell sites in Puerto Rico were out of service, while 76 percent of the cell sites in the U.S. Virgin Islands were out of service.¹ A month after the storm, 76 percent of cell sites in Puerto Rico and 55 percent of cell sites in the U.S. Virgin Islands remained out of service.² Two months after the storm, 36 percent of cell sites in Puerto Rico and 37 percent of the cell sites in the U.S. Virgin Islands were still out of

¹ Federal Communications Commission, *Communications Status Report for Areas Impacted by Hurricane Maria* (Sept. 21, 2017).

² Federal Communications Commission, *Communications Status Report for Areas Impacted by Hurricane Maria* (Oct. 17, 2017).

service.³ Throughout this entire period, the FCC reported that “the majority” of cable and wireline customers did not have access to those services, primarily due to power outages caused by the storm.⁴

Communications services are much more than a convenience, especially in times of disasters they are the lifeline that allows anyone in danger to call emergency responders for help, or someone to communicate with a family member that they are okay. Emergency broadcasts are critical to informing people about the best way to stay safe and where to find necessities like bottled water, food, and shelter.

The communications network failures in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands were deeply detrimental to their residents, and may have even caused additional deaths in Puerto Rico.⁵ Free Press examined the failures of the communications providers serving the people of Puerto Rico and the FCC’s role in the response and recovery to the hurricane.⁶ Its report highlights the need for a critical examination of the causes of the communications failures in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands following the hurricane and subsequent efforts to restore communications service.

Ensuring the resiliency and reliability of communications networks in the United States has been a top priority of mine. To prevent similar failures in the future, it is critical that I understand what happened during the hurricane and its aftermath, and what could be improved. To that end, I request that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) begin an evaluation of the communications failures and restoration efforts following Hurricane Maria, to include an examination of the following questions:

1. Has the FCC adequately responded to the communications problems in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands following Hurricane Maria? To the extent the FCC took action, were the actions timely or could the FCC have acted more quickly? Did the FCC coordinate with other relevant agencies, such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency, to address the communications problems? What more could the FCC have done to ensure that the residents of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands had access to communications networks as quickly as possible?

³ Federal Communications Commission, *Communications Status Report for Areas Impacted by Hurricane Maria* (Nov. 17, 2017).

⁴ See, e.g., Federal Communications Commission, *Communications Status Report for Areas Impacted by Hurricane Maria* (Nov. 17, 2017).

⁵ *After Hurricane Maria, Puerto Rico’s Internet Problems Go from Bad to Worse*, NOVA (Oct. 23, 2018).

⁶ Free Press, *Connecting the Dots: The Telecommunications Crisis in Puerto Rico* (May 2019).

2. Did the FCC's response differ from the agency's response to hurricanes that hit the U.S. mainland? Did the FCC's coordination with and examination of communications providers' efforts to restore service differ from the agency's response to hurricanes that hit the U.S. mainland?
3. According to the FCC, one of the benefits to communications providers of the voluntary Disaster Information Reporting System (DIRS) is that it "better ensures that [providers] will be able to serve their communities, providing them with critical updates and risk communications information."
 - a. Was DIRS effective for this purpose in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria? In what ways could DIRS be a more meaningful source of information for the public of critical network outages during emergencies and natural disasters?
4. Despite releasing reports following other hurricanes, the FCC has not released a report on the communications failures caused by Hurricane Maria. In a report assessing problems that arose in the aftermath of Hurricane Michael, the FCC identified failures of the voluntary Wireless Resiliency Cooperative Framework that exacerbated communications outages caused by that hurricane.
 - a. Were there similar issues with the Framework during the aftermath of Hurricane Maria?
5. The FCC approved additional funding to accelerate the restoration of communications networks damaged and destroyed by Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.⁷ How is the FCC tracking the funds and ensuring that the funds are being used as intended?

If you have any questions about this inquiry, please contact Dan Miller with the Committee staff at (202) 225-2927.

Sincerely,



Frank Pallone, Jr.
Chairman

⁷ Federal Communications Commission, *The Uniendo a Puerto Rico Fund and the Connect USVI Fund, et al.*, Order and Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, WC Docket Nos. 18-143,10-90, 14-58, 33 FCC Rcd 5404 (2019).