

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

February 12, 2018

William B. Long
Administrator
Federal Emergency Management Agency
500 C St. S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20024

Dear Administrator Long,

We write today regarding the families from Puerto Rico who evacuated to our states in the wake of Hurricane Maria. Given the limited financial resources of many evacuees, we ask that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) permit families enrolled in the Transitional Shelter Assistance (TSA) program in our states to continue living in TSA shelters until March 20, 2018, even if an eligibility check determines that their homes in Puerto Rico are habitable.

FEMA's Transitional Shelter Assistance program provides temporary shelter to individuals whose homes are "[uninhabitable] or inaccessible due to a Presidentially-declared disaster."¹ Under the TSA program, eligible applicants can stay free of charge in participating hotel and motel rooms.² On September 20, 2017, President Trump announced a major disaster declaration for Puerto Rico in the wake of Hurricane Maria,³ which made landfall on the island as a Category 4 storm and devastated the territory. FEMA and the government of Puerto Rico announced on October 30, 2017, that the TSA program was being made "available to Puerto Ricans who are unable to return to their homes because they are displaced."⁴

Hurricane Maria destroyed over 70,000 homes in Puerto Rico and left 300,000 more damaged—forcing thousands of families to leave the island and seek shelter on the mainland United States. According to FEMA, over 10,000 Puerto Ricans—almost 4,000 families—in 42 states are living in hotels and motels through the TSA program.⁵ This includes the hundreds of families relying on TSA assistance in Massachusetts.

¹ Federal Emergency Management Agency, "Fact Sheet: Transitional Shelter Assistance" (online at <https://www.fema.gov/media-library-data/1504386291776-95f2e849464628ac124a7f859c448e2e/FactSheetTransitionalShelterAssistance.pdf>).

² Federal Emergency Management Agency, "FEMA Evacuee Hotel List" (online at <http://www.femaevachotels.com/index.php>).

³ The White House, "President Donald J. Trump Approves Puerto Rico Disaster Declaration" (September 21, 2017) (online at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trump-approves-puerto-rico-disaster-declaration-2/>).

⁴ Federal Emergency Management Agency, "Transitional Sheltering Assistance Available to Residents of Puerto Rico Displaced by Hurricanes Irma and Maria" (October 30, 2017) (online at <https://www.fema.gov/news-release/2017/10/30/4339/transitional-sheltering-assistance-available-residents-puerto-rico-displaced>).

⁵ Claudia Torrens, "Many Puerto Ricans still adrift in US hotels after Hurricane Maria," *ABC News* (January 29, 2018) (online at <http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/puerto-ricans-adrift-us-hotels-hurricane-maria-52675363>).

Though FEMA typically extends the TSA program in 14-day intervals⁶, the agency and the Puerto Rican government announced on December 29, 2017, that it was extending TSA benefits until March 20, 2018, “due to a large number of damaged homes across the island and lack of available utilities in many areas.”⁷ This extension included two eligibility checks for TSA beneficiaries. An initial review occurred on January 13, 2018, and the second is scheduled for February 14, 2018.⁸

While we recognize the need for FEMA to conduct periodic review of program eligibility, we are concerned by reports from several states that evacuees deemed ineligible for the TSA program have been forced to leave hotels and motels with few financial resources and little access to alternate housing options. In Massachusetts, for example, state officials determined that 53 of the 65 families who lost TSA eligibility after the January 13th review “did not have money to pay for housing and would be left homeless,” leaving caseworkers and government officials scrambling to provide them with housing.⁹ Furthermore, a number of families appealed FEMA’s eligibility determination, arguing that they do “not actually have habitable houses to return to.”¹⁰ Though the FEMA appeals process can take up to 45 days, appealing families cannot receive TSA benefits while they wait—leaving many stuck without the financial resources to return to Puerto Rico or pay for temporary housing in the interim.¹¹

Nearly five months after Hurricane Maria, Puerto Rico continues to grapple with crippled infrastructure and damaged homes. The evacuees are struggling to accrue financial resources, make arrangements for short- and long-term housing solutions, learn the habitability status of their former homes, and plan to travel—if possible—back to Puerto Rico. Given the circumstances of these Puerto Rican families, as well as the unique challenges facing evacuees who lose access to the TSA program, we respectfully request that you permit evacuees living in our states to continue living in TSA shelters until March 20, 2018, even if an eligibility check determines that their homes in Puerto Rico are habitable.

⁶ Federal Emergency Management Agency, “Fact Sheet: Transitional Shelter Assistance” (online at <https://www.fema.gov/media-library-data/1504386291776-95f2e849464628ac124a7f859c448e2e/FactSheetTransitionalShelterAssistance.pdf>).

⁷ Federal Emergency Management Agency, Alex Amparo, “Transitional Sheltering Assistance Request #1 For FEMA DR-4336-PR; FEMA DR-4339-PR” (December 29, 2017) (online at <https://soto.house.gov/sites/soto.house.gov/files/documents/TSA%20Extension%20DR-4336-4339-PR.pdf>).

⁸ Shira Schoenberg, “Puerto Rican evacuees in Massachusetts risk losing housing benefits,” *MassLive.com* (February 7, 2018) (online at http://www.masslive.com/politics/index.ssf/2018/02/puerto_rican_families_in_massa.html).

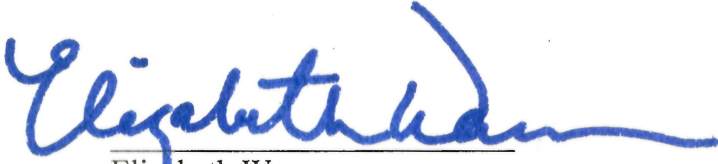
⁹ Shira Schoenberg, “Puerto Rican evacuees in Massachusetts risk losing housing benefits,” *MassLive.com* (February 7, 2018) (online at http://www.masslive.com/politics/index.ssf/2018/02/puerto_rican_families_in_massa.html).

¹⁰ Shira Schoenberg, “Puerto Rican evacuees in Massachusetts risk losing housing benefits,” *MassLive.com* (February 7, 2018) (online at http://www.masslive.com/politics/index.ssf/2018/02/puerto_rican_families_in_massa.html).

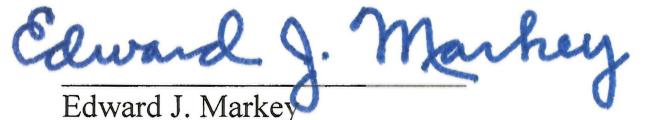
¹¹ Letter from Governor Charlie Baker, Mayor Martin Walsh, Mayor Jasiel Correia, Mayor Alex Morse, Mayor Daniel Rivera, Mayor Jon Mitchel, Mayor Dmoinic Sarno, and Mayor Joseph Petty, to FEMA Administrator Brock Long (February 6, 2018).

Please don't hesitate to reach out to Alex Blenkinsopp of Senator Warren's staff at 202-224-4543 or Jeremy D'Aloisio at 202-224-2742 with any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator