

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

October 19, 2017

The Honorable Elaine C. Duke
Acting Secretary
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
Washington, DC 20528

Dear Acting Secretary Duke:

We write to express our concern about the accuracy of the fatality count in Puerto Rico due to Hurricane Maria. An accurate death toll is important for understanding the true severity of the situation on the ground, for recognizing potential problems and vulnerabilities, for assessing the quality of the disaster response so far, and for setting policy going forward. Unfortunately, we have reason to believe the total might be understated. We urge you to take steps to ensure the correct current fatality count and to maintain its accuracy in the future.

Hurricane Maria is a tragedy that has already claimed dozens of lives in Puerto Rico. As of today, the official death count is 48.¹ But there are numerous worrying signs that the actual total is significantly higher:

- Hospital morgues are reportedly full.²
- Puerto Rico's Institute of Forensic Sciences contained hundreds of corpses, though news reports were unclear on how many of those were hurricane-related fatalities.³
- One hospital administrator alone reported 49 deaths after Hurricane Maria.⁴
- In the three days after the storm, the fatality rate in one region was twice the norm.⁵
- One comprehensive compilation—which also collected the reports above—found that there have been numerous credible cases of more deaths caused by the hurricane than are officially tallied. This analysis states, “News reports cite the deaths of more than 450 additional people since the hurricane, and 69 people have been reported missing.”⁶

¹ “Puerto Rico raises Hurricane Maria death toll to 48,” Associated Press, Oct. 14, 2017, <https://apnews.com/6570696b5e464f7e8e9939b2a028b7de>.

² Omayra Sosa Pascual, “Hurricane Maria’s death toll in Puerto Rico is higher than official count, experts say,” Miami Herald, Sept. 28, 2017, <http://www.miamiherald.com/news/weather/hurricane/article175955031.html>.

³ Laura M. Quintero, “Pesquera explica las 18 muertes adicionales,” El Vocero, Oct. 5, 2017, http://www.elvocero.com/ley-y-orden/pesquera-explica-las-muertes-adicionales/article_f6299ce6-a9e2-11e7-b83f-cb9691983a7f.html.

⁴ John Burnett, “112 Degrees With No Water: Puerto Rican Hospitals Battle Life And Death Daily,” NPR Morning Edition, Oct. 5, 2017, <http://www.npr.org/2017/10/05/555796327/following-disaster-teams-in-puerto-rico>.

⁵ Molly Hennessy-Fiske, “In one Puerto Rican nursing home, a struggle to get power and keep patients alive,” Los Angeles Times, Oct. 1, 2017, <http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-puerto-rico-healthcare-20170930-story.html>.

⁶ Eliza Barclay and Alexia Fernández Campbell, “Everything that’s been reported about deaths in Puerto Rico is at odds with the official count,” Vox, Oct. 11, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/science-and-health/2017/10/11/16424356/puerto-rico-official-hurricane-maria-death-toll>.


Representatives Nydia Velazquez and Bennie Thompson have already brought this discrepancy to your attention. They wrote that “these numbers call into question the veracity of official government death counts,” and called for “complete transparency from all entities working on this unraveling humanitarian crisis.”⁷ We echo our House colleagues’ concern and their call for transparency.

The aftermath of the hurricane continues to pose a mortal danger to many people on Puerto Rico. Water contamination is suspected to have led to deaths and cases of leptospirosis.⁸ There are concerns about dengue, chikungunya, and Zika.⁹ Puerto Ricans have been obtaining water from a contaminated Superfund site.¹⁰

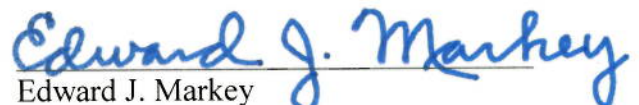
The need for an accurate death toll is especially important because President Trump seems to be using the number of fatalities to determine the quality of the disaster response. “Sixteen people certified,” he said of the death count during his visit to Puerto Rico. “Sixteen versus literally thousands of people. You can be very proud.” He said this shortly after referring to “a real catastrophe like Katrina.”¹¹ Given President Trump’s recent threat to withdraw relief workers from Puerto Rico,¹² it is crucial that he and the public not receive erroneously low fatality totals.

We urge you to provide all necessary resources to confirm that storm-related deaths are being counted correctly, to ensure that there is sufficient cooperation with local authorities to obtain accurate information, to verify that the methodology for calculating fatalities in Puerto Rico accords with best practices and does not undercount, and to report back to us on when you will be able to provide an accurate total.

Sincerely,



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator

⁷ Letter from Reps. Nydia Velazquez and Bennie Thompson to Acting Secretary Duke, Oct. 12, 2017, http://velazquez.house.gov/sites/velazquez.house.gov/files/2089_001.pdf.

⁸ Michael Melia, “Puerto Rico investigates post-hurricane disease outbreak,” Associated Press, Oct. 11, 2017, <https://apnews.com/854bcfca40e74ef69eb8e5c1e907ab5b>.

⁹ Stephanie Soucheray, “Groups warn of infectious disease threats in Puerto Rico,” CIDRAP News, Oct. 12, 2017, <http://www.cidrap.umn.edu/news-perspective/2017/10/groups-warn-infectious-disease-threats-puerto-rico>.

¹⁰ John D. Sutter, “Desperate Puerto Ricans are drinking water from a hazardous-waste site,” CNN, Oct. 14, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/10/13/us/puerto-rico-superfund-water/index.html>; Arelis R. Hernández and Brady Dennis, “Desperate Puerto Ricans line up for water—at a hazardous waste site,” Washington Post, Oct. 16, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2017/10/16/desperate-puerto-ricans-line-up-for-water-at-a-hazardous-waste-site/>.

¹¹ Remarks by President Trump in briefing on Hurricane Maria relief efforts, White House, Oct. 3, 2017, <http://whitehousepressbriefings.com/speeches-and-remarks/remarks-president-trump-briefing-hurricane-maria-relief-efforts/>.

¹² Tweet by Donald J. Trump, Oct. 12, 2017, <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/918432809282342912>.



Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator



Bernard Sanders
United States Senator



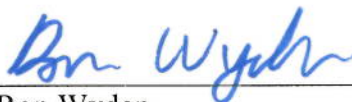
Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator



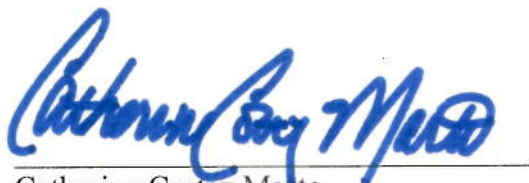
Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator



Kamala D. Harris
United States Senator



Ron Wyden
United States Senator



Catherine Cortez Masto
United States Senator



Sherrod Brown
United States Senator



Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator



Cory A. Booker
United States Senator



Brian Schatz
United States Senator