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April 10, 2023

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Senate Majority Leader
322 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Senate Minority Leader
317 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Speaker of the House
2468 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Hakeem Jeffries
House Minority Leader
2433 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Majority Leader Schumer, Republican Leader McConnell, Speaker McCarthy, and Democratic Leader Jeffries:

We are writing to request the immediate retooling of Puerto Rico's Nutritional Assistance Program (NAP) so that at least half of the funds allocated to this program can be redirected to support the island's local farmers and promote greater agricultural self-sufficiency. The upcoming negotiations over the farm bill provide the perfect opportunity to address Puerto Rico's critical food insecurity issues, as the island imports over 80 percent¹ of its food. As you consider the transition of Puerto Rico from NAP to the federal SNAP program, we ask that regardless of the final decision on this issue, you act today to address Puerto Ricans' real need for nutritional security and food sovereignty.

By relying almost exclusively on food coming from outside the island, Puerto Rico's nutritional system lacks the necessary sustainability to support itself, especially in an emergency. Addressing these gaps has life-and-death consequences. In the aftermath of Hurricane María, the lack of a robust local agriculture system resulted in thousands of Puerto Ricans going hungry as ships were unable to dock at the storm-battered ports.² Young activists and local farmers are leading the fight for agricultural sovereignty.³ With the right legislative fix, we should be able to achieve this important goal.

As a Spanish-speaking island in the Caribbean, the retooling of this program must also be done in a culturally competent way. That is why all activities funded under this initiative must be conducted in Puerto Rican Spanish, and all materials and resources used in connection with the

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/01/opinion/puerto-rico-jones-act.html>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/dec/23/puerto-rico-agroecology-farmers>

³ <https://lifeandthyme.com/food/puerto-rico-struggle-for-agricultural-sovereignty/>



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program must also be in the island's native language. This will ensure all eligible organizations and farmers can access and take full advantage of the program and its resources. Our proposal would require the Secretary of Agriculture to work with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to deploy agricultural and language expertise to support the development and implementation of community agricultural programs and farms in Puerto Rico. USAID has the experienced personnel and resources to make these adjustments in a way that puts Puerto Ricans' socioeconomic reality at the center of the program.

Puerto Rico's cultural and geographic realities also make it necessary to ensure continued funding in response to natural disasters. NAP is a block grant program, and in the event of another storm or earthquake there would not be any automatic increase in funding because the program is capped. During an emergency, victims cannot afford to wait until Congress takes action to appropriate additional funding. According to a survey conducted by George Washington University, 40% of Puerto Ricans experience food insecurity.⁴ Implementing a flexible nutrition assistance program that includes automatic increases during emergencies will guarantee that more Puerto Ricans have access to the food they need.

In order for Puerto Rico's eventual transition to the SNAP program, Congress must make the necessary legislative retooling required to provide nutritional security and agricultural self-sufficiency for the island. That is why we urge you to include language in the Farm Bill that allows half of the funding that is appropriated to the island for food assistance to be strictly devoted to local farms and community agricultural programs. Doing so would ensure that Puerto Rico begins to recover in a sustainable manner, and in a way that helps Puerto Ricans thrive, and not continue to depend on a fragile system of food importation.

Thank you for your attention to this urgent matter. We look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Juan M. Calderón Cuza
Chief Operating Officer (COO)
The Puerto Rican Cultural Center

⁴<https://publichealth.gwu.edu/content/survey-finds-40-percent-puerto-rican-families-reporting-food-insecurity-due-covid-19>