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ONE HUNDRED FIFTEENTH CONGRESS
Congress of the United States
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MEMORANDUM

October 22, 2017

To: Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations Democratic Members and Staff

Fr: Committee on Energy and Commerce Democratic Staff

Re: Hearing on “Examining HHS’s Public Health Preparedness for and Response to the 2017 Hurricane Season.”

On **Tuesday, October 24, 2017, at 10 a.m. in room 2123 of the Rayburn House Office Building**, the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations will hold a hearing entitled “Examining HHS’s Public Health Preparedness for and Response to the 2017 Hurricane Season.”

In August and September 2017, three hurricanes of massive scale hit the United States in short succession. Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria devastated lives and caused billions of dollars in damage. This hearing will examine the public health impacts of these storms, focusing on recovery efforts to date and what must still be done to help affected communities.

I. Background

On August 25, Hurricane Harvey made landfall north of Corpus Christi, Texas, as a category 4 storm with winds up to 132 mph.¹ It stalled over Houston and Southeast Texas before meandering back into the Gulf of Mexico and making a second landfall near Cameron, Louisiana, on August 30.² Harvey caused catastrophic flooding throughout this region, in particular the 100 mile-long area between Houston and Beaumont, Texas, with some areas

¹ National Weather Service, Major Hurricane Harvey – August 25-29, 2017 (www.weather.gov/crp/hurricane_harvey).

² *Id.*

receiving more than 50 inches of rain.³ In total, the storm claimed at least 75 lives and caused at least \$160 billion in estimated damage.⁴

Less than two weeks after Harvey flooded Texas, Hurricane Irma became the strongest Atlantic hurricane on record, with winds of 185 mph.⁵ It struck the U.S. Virgin Islands as a Category 5 hurricane, “rendering the islands so unrecognizable [that] satellites could register the stark change from space.”⁶ On September 10, Irma devastated large portions of the Florida Keys as a Category 4 hurricane before making landfall at Marco Island on the Gulf Coast of Florida.⁷ Ultimately, the storm took at least 75 lives in Florida and caused an estimated \$50 billion to \$100 billion in damage.⁸

Just ten days later, on September 20, Hurricane Maria struck Puerto Rico as a Category 4 hurricane, causing widespread flooding and destruction, including catastrophic damage to the island’s electrical grid, telecommunications system, and infrastructure. Nearly one month after the storm hit, nearly 80 percent of the island continues to lack power for lighting, drinking water treatment, food and medicine refrigeration, mobile service to call 911 and a host of other critical functions that require electricity.⁹ The lack of electricity has had other impacts on public health as well. For example, reports suggest that dialysis treatment centers have had to reduce their hours due to a lack of diesel fuel to run their generators. Finally, other reports have indicated that some hospitals have faced medicine shortages and that people have died from bacterial

³ *Id.*; *Town after Town Under Water in the 100 Miles from Houston to Beaumont*, New York Times (Sept. 2, 2017).

⁴ *Storm deaths: Harvey claims lives of more than 75 in Texas*, Houston Chronicle (Oct. 9, 2017); *Harvey to be costliest natural disaster in U.S. history, estimated cost of \$190 billion*, USA Today (Aug. 30, 2017).

⁵ *Hurricane Irma is now the strongest hurricane ever recorded in the Atlantic*, Quartz (Sept. 6, 2017).

⁶ *The Virgin Islands, After Irma: ‘It Was Like Stepping Onto Another Planet,’* NPR (Sept. 14, 2017).

⁷ National Hurricane Center, *Irma Makes Landfall at Cudjoe Key in Lower Florida Keys* (Sept. 10, 2017) (www.nhc.noaa.gov/archive/2017/all11/all112017.update.09101318.shtml?); *Destructive winds, rain hit Florida as Hurricane Irma makes landfall in the Keys*, Washington Post (Sept. 10, 2017); National Hurricane Center, *Center of Hurricane Irma Makes Landfall at Marco Island* (Sept. 10, 2017) (www.nhc.noaa.gov/archive/2017/all11/all112017.update.09101941.shtml?).

⁸ *Unofficial death toll from Hurricane Irma now stands at 75 across the state*, Miami Herald (Sept. 23, 2017); *The stunning price tags for Hurricanes Harvey and Irma, explained*, Vox (Sept. 18, 2017).

⁹ *About 1 million Americans without running water. 3 million without power. This is life one month after Hurricane Maria.*, CNN (Oct. 18, 2017).

diseases caught from floodwaters.¹⁰ The official death toll from Hurricane Maria currently stands at 48, but reports suggest that the number may be much higher.¹¹

The U.S. Virgin Islands and its healthcare system were also decimated by Hurricane Irma and Hurricane Maria. The governor of the U.S. Virgin Islands has stated that “he expects that the hospitals on St. Thomas and St. Croix, the most populated islands, will have to be torn down and rebuilt.”¹² As the territory has been depending upon Puerto Rico for relief supplies, doctors, medicine, and fuel, its relief and supply chains have been cut off by the devastation that Puerto Rico itself has suffered.¹³ It is unclear when the U.S. Virgin Islands will be able to repair its infrastructure or its healthcare system.

II. Public Health Concerns

Natural disasters of the magnitude of Hurricanes Maria, Harvey, and Irma create myriad public health concerns. During such storms and in their immediate aftermath, flooding and destruction can cause injury and death. For example, nearly all of those killed by Hurricane Harvey drowned in the storm’s floodwaters.¹⁴

Significant public health concerns often remain or increase after a storm has passed. For example, power outages and the destruction of infrastructure can hinder recovery efforts and create major threats to basic human needs and the prevention of infectious disease. Long power outages can lead to contaminated food, and flooding can lead to unsafe water and food supplies, potentially causing deadly illnesses. In Puerto Rico, at least a third of the island still lacks access to clean drinking water, and nearly half of the island’s sewage treatment plants are out of service. As a result, some residents have resorted to drinking from contaminated wells and superfund hazardous waste sites, and are reportedly bathing and washing clothes in rivers contaminated with raw sewage.¹⁵

In addition, flooding and infrastructure failure can lead to exposure to a range of dangerous substances such as mold and hazardous chemicals like lead, asbestos, arsenic, and

¹⁰ *Puerto Rico’s Health Care Is in Dire Condition, Three Weeks After Maria*, New York Times (Oct. 10, 2017).

¹¹ *Puerto Rico death toll rises to 48*, The Hill (Oct. 14, 2017); *Everything that’s been reported about deaths in Puerto Rico is at odds with the official count*, Vox (Oct. 11, 2017); *Real death toll in Puerto Rico is probably 450 – much higher than official count*, USA Today (Oct. 18, 2017).

¹² *In the Virgin Islands, Hurricane Maria Drowned What Irma Didn’t Destroy*, New York Times (Sept. 27, 2017).

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Human Toll of Harvey Comes Into View as Waters Recede*, New York Times (Sept. 2, 2017).

¹⁵ *The unrelenting crisis in Puerto Rico is forcing people to drink dirty water*, Vox (Oct. 18, 2017).

gasoline. Mold, in particular, is associated with respiratory symptoms, allergies, asthma, and immunological reactions, and may emit chemicals that affect the human nervous system.¹⁶ In Texas, toxic spills at flooded Superfund sites may have exposed communities to toxic waste, including very harmful chemicals such as dioxin, which may cause immune system damage, reproductive and developmental problems, and cancer.¹⁷

Hospitals and critical patient care are directly impacted by the lack of electricity and damaged infrastructure. In Puerto Rico, the vast majority of the island's hospitals lost power, and were forced to rely on generators. While power has been restored to some, very few of hospitals have steady, reliable electricity.¹⁸ According to the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), a number of hospitals and community health clinics remain shuttered, raising concerns about the level of care available on the island. In Florida, 14 patients died when a nursing home lost power and was unable to maintain its air conditioning system.¹⁹

Medicaid plays a critical role in our nation's response to natural disasters. Even in areas where medical care is available, there is an increased need for access to Medicaid to ensure that vulnerable populations can obtain needed care. During Hurricane Katrina, the Bush Administration made a number of changes to ease enrollment barriers in the Medicaid program and allow for states to receive disaster-related coverage waivers. Congress provided additional authority and federal financing to support those efforts through the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) should undertake similar efforts within their administrative authority immediately, and Congress must also again provide needed additional Medicaid financing and authority.

¹⁶ World Health Organization, *Health Effects Associated with Dampness and Mold* (2009); *The Looming Consequences of Breathing Mold*, The Atlantic (Aug. 30, 2017).

¹⁷ *Toxic waste seeps from a Houston Superfund site after Harvey's floods*, The Verge (Sept. 29, 2017).

¹⁸ *4 out of 5 Puerto Ricans are still without power – but darkness is far from the island's biggest problem*, Business Insider (Oct. 17, 2017).

¹⁹ *2 More Dead After Florida Nursing Home Lost AC During Hurricane Irma*, TIME (Oct. 9, 2017).

Finally, pharmaceutical shortages caused by Hurricane Maria create serious public health risks across the United States. HHS reports that there are 18 pharmaceutical manufacturing plants located in Puerto Rico which produce drugs of high national importance. These plants are not operating at full capacity, and HHS is reportedly having difficulties transporting essential pharmaceuticals, such as saline, off the island to the mainland.²⁰

III. Witnesses

The following witnesses have been invited to testify:

Ms. Kimberly Brandt

Principal Deputy Administrator for Operations, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services

The Honorable Scott Gottlieb, MD

Commissioner, U.S. Food and Drug Administration

The Honorable Robert P. Kadlec, MD

Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response, Department of Health and Human Services

Rear Admiral Upper Half Stephen C. Redd, MD

Director of the Office of Public Health Preparedness and Response, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

²⁰ House Committee on Energy and Commerce, Interview with Health and Human Services Officials (Sept. 26, 2017); *FDA Warns 'Critical' Drug Shortages Possible After Hurricane Maria Battered Puerto Rico*, USA Today (Sept. 26, 2017); *Hospitals scramble to avert saline shortage in wake of Puerto Rico disaster*, Washington Post (Oct. 11, 2017).