

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM

2157 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6143

MAJORITY (202) 225-5074
MINORITY (202) 225-5051

<http://oversight.house.gov>

Opening Statement Ranking Member Elijah E. Cummings

Hearing on “Evaluating Federal Disaster Response and Recovery Efforts” November 29, 2018

Last year, after devastating hurricanes slammed into Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, President Trump repeatedly touted his Administration’s response as “unbelievable,” “amazing,” and “incredible.” Unfortunately, the facts on the ground show the exact opposite.

The Trump Administration completely botched a massive \$156 million contract to deliver 30 million emergency meals in the aftermath of the storm. They ignored one of the key lessons from Hurricane Katrina—setting up advance contracts for emergency provisions. Instead, they rushed to give this huge contract to a tiny, one-person company with a terrible and obvious history of failing much smaller contracts. Predictably, they had to cancel the contract—all while thousands of starving American citizens were in desperate need of food.

My staff uncovered this issue with absolutely no help from FEMA or the Department of Homeland Security or the White House. Despite our multiple letters requesting documents to explain this massive screw-up, we have received not one document regarding this issue.

The Trump Administration also completely failed to respond to desperate pleas for help from grocery stores that needed fuel to keep their food from spoiling—including tons of produce, dairy, and other perishables. My staff obtained documents showing Walmart explaining repeatedly that their grocery stores had generators in place, but they needed emergency fuel to keep the food from spoiling. Puerto Rican officials communicated these concerns directly to FEMA in person and in writing, but by September 27—a full week after the hurricane—no fuel was provided.

Again, the Trump Administration has refused to provide any of the documents we requested regarding this massive failure.

Nearly 3,000 people died in this tragedy—more than in Hurricane Katrina. But rather than recognizing any failings by his own Administration, President Trump accused Democrats of somehow manufacturing the death count. He tweeted: “This was done by the Democrats in order to make me look as bad as possible.”

Today, I am releasing additional documents that also contradict President Trump’s claims about his Administration’s response.

Specifically, I am releasing an email sent on November 29, 2017—70 days after the hurricane struck. This email was sent to Mike Byrne, the top FEMA official overseeing the response in Puerto Rico. The sender's name is redacted, but it is from someone on the ground in Vieques in Puerto Rico. This email warns that conditions remain dire, "with limited to no communications," and that "gas lines are in excess of 6 hours at times due to inconsistent delivery." The email concludes:

Mr. Byrne, we need help. More than two months following Hurricane Maria, we are watching our local electric crews struggle to repair the system with no equipment and no material. We are hearing estimates that we will be one year without regular power. WHY?

This email was forwarded to a congressional office and directly to FEMA Administrator Brock Long. The forwarding email stated:

Here is another sample. I know you have had a rough time in Houston but at least you had competent people in charge of the response. We have incompetent people in charge here and are getting no response to our urgent needs, first of all restoration of power. Please share this with Rep McCaul along with our urgent request for the committee on homeland security to convene hearings on the utter failure of the Federal response here and on the main island of Puerto Rico.

We have no record of whether Administrator Long responded to this email. Instead, we have press reports and Inspector General findings that Administrator Long abused his position of trust as the head of FEMA and charged the taxpayers tens of thousands of dollars for his personal use of government vehicles, which included a trip to Hawaii where a government employee shuttled his family around the island.

Unfortunately, and regrettably, this Committee has failed the American people as well.

In the immediate days after the hurricane, I asked the Chairman to follow the bipartisan example of our former Chairman, Rep. Tom Davis, a Republican, who investigated the Bush Administration's response to Hurricane Katrina. I asked him to send the same letters that Chairman Davis sent to federal agencies and the White House. Chairman Davis obtained more than 22,000 pages of documents from the Bush White House, and he also obtained a briefing from the top White House official in charge of the response.

In contrast, Chairman Gowdy would not even send a letter to the White House. He would not ask for a single document. And we have not received a single document. This Committee walled off the White House from scrutiny at the same time President Trump was claiming that up is down and down is up.

I greatly respect the Chairman as a person, as an attorney, and as a friend. But this is not transparency. This is not accountability. And this certainly is not oversight.

So, with that, let me take care of a few housekeeping matters and ask unanimous consent on several motions.

First, I ask unanimous consent to enter into the record all of our letters regarding the botched \$156 million contract to deliver 30 million meals to the people of Puerto Rico.

I also ask unanimous consent to enter into the record all of our letters regarding the Trump Administration's failure to respond to urgent pleas from grocery stores to obtain fuel to run generators to prevent food from spoiling.

In addition, I ask unanimous consent that the new emails I am releasing today that were sent to Administrator Long be entered into the hearing record.

Next, I ask unanimous consent to enter into the record this excellent report that our staff compiled based on our own independent investigation of the Trump Administration's failures.

Finally, I want to make clear that Democrats asked for this hearing on September 29, 2017—more than a year ago. I ask unanimous consent that the letter from me and Ranking Member Plaskett be entered into the record.

Unfortunately, despite our request, the Committee held no hearings on the hurricanes in the past 14 months.

Instead, this hearing was scheduled for today—which is the same day that we as Democrats have to be up in the Longworth building organizing our entire caucus, voting on leadership positions, and establishing our rules for the next Congress.

Our Republican colleagues promised to accommodate us. But they would not move the hearing to a different day, and they would not even move up the start time by 30 minutes so we could ask Administrator Long our questions.

So here is what I will do. I will take the questions we wanted to ask and submit them as official Questions for the Record. Administrator Long, I want answers to every one of these questions before the end of this year.

When disaster strikes, the American people do not want politics—they want results. They do not want posturing—they want leadership. They do not want excuses—they want a nonpartisan, effective, and efficient response that save lives.

I guarantee you, Administrator Long, this hearing will not be your last before us. We want full compliance with every one of our previous requests. You are on notice.

Contact: Jennifer Werner, Communications Director, (202) 226-5181.