

April 2, 2020

Hon. Wanda Vázquez Garced
Governor of Puerto Rico
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c. Hon. Thomas Rivera Schatz
President, Puerto Rico Senate
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Hon. Carlos "Johnny" Méndez Nuñez
President, Puerto Rico House of Representatives
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Re: Public policy requests submitted by Hispanic Federation to mitigate COVID-19 impact in Puerto Rico.

Honorable Governor Vázquez Garced:

Hispanic Federation is a non-profit organization founded in 1990 in the state of New York, with the goal of supporting and empowering Hispanic communities and institutions through initiatives in the areas of education, health, immigration, civic participation, economic development, environment, and civil rights. For years, the organization has advocated for the rights of Puerto Ricans and other Hispanic communities at the federal, state, and local levels. Today, the organization has offices in five states and Washington, D.C., and after Hurricane María established operations permanently on the island. To date, Hispanic Federation has allocated more than \$35 million to over 120 non-profit initiatives and groups around Puerto Rico focused on the areas of recovery, housing, agriculture, primary health, mental health and energy, among others.

The public health crisis facing the country is unprecedented and it is necessary to unite all sectors and efforts to confront it. As evidenced after Hurricane Mara and the earthquakes in the south, non-profits are a key sector in supporting people in this emergency. For this reason, Hispanic Federation, together with other non-profit organizations, **have requested that you create a Social Task Force to integrate our sector in the government's response plans and provide us with the necessary support to be able to collaborate in the fight against this pandemic.**

To this end, Hispanic Federation created a COVID-19 emergency fund for our network of non-profits, with an initial investment of \$1 million in Puerto Rico. Unfortunately, \$1 million is not enough to meet the sector's immense need, and for this reason, it is imperative that you take the necessary measures to protect the economic viability of the sector and ensure the continuity of the essential services that organizations offer in their communities.

In addition to these requests, Hispanic Federation respectfully submits its public policy recommendations to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 in Puerto Rico.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO BE ADDRESSED BY THE SOCIAL TASK FORCE

- **Establish or strengthen protocols to meet the needs of vulnerable communities**

Public policies to mitigate the contagion and economic impact of the virus must address all sectors of society fairly, including vulnerable and historically marginalized communities. These include people with disabilities, homeless people, people over the age of 60, survivors of gender-based violence, LGBTTIQ people, immigrants, mental health patients, incarcerated people, people with chronic illnesses, people working within the informal sector, and others. For example, the government must:

- Ensure that undocumented immigrants are protected during this emergency. Among other things, provide them with free coronavirus diagnostic and treatment tests, as permitted with the announced federal funds. In addition, provide access to services, essential goods, and economic benefits.
- Define how public safety personnel will implement the curfew with respect to the population of people who are homeless while preparing the Assistance Centers for People Who Are Homeless.
- With regard to people who are incarcerated, you should consider the immediate alternative of allowing those who do not pose a public safety risk to complete their sentences through alternative forms outside of prison, and evaluate other strategies to reduce the incarcerated population to prevent conglomerations of people and promote public health.

Such alternatives should be fed by the experience and knowledge of non-profit organizations. These organizations are key in identifying needs and establishing or strengthening specific programs and protocols to address said communities.

- **Safeguarding the mental health of the people**

The people of Puerto Rico are confronting a pandemic, dragging the psychological impacts of devastating hurricanes and earthquakes. The economic crisis, social isolation, “homeschooling,” the health risks that knock on our door every day, and the possibility of loss of loved ones are factors that intensify people's mental vulnerability. In turn, gender-based violence and child abuse intensify, among other things. For all this, the government must establish a short- and long-term plan, as or more aggressive than the health and economic response plans already started. We can't afford to lose more lives because of lack of attention on mental health.

PUBLIC HEALTH RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Obtain necessary medical equipment**

The government must make an extraordinary effort to obtain all the medical equipment needed in the crisis, including: (1) safety equipment for health workers, (2) equipment in all hospitals in the country, including private hospitals and federally qualified health centers, and (3) diagnostic tests.

- **Adopt protocol that ensures fair and equitable care in hospitals and any healthcare institution**

We must prepare for the worst-case scenario. Given the proximity of the peak of contagion and the number of critical cases on the island, the government has a duty to adopt a **clear protocol** that ensures that health services are provided in an equitable and non-selective manner. Only objective and fair criteria should govern the distribution of medical equipment and services when such equipment and services are lacking. Once adopted, **the protocol must be published and explained to the people so that they know their rights as patients during this pandemic.**

- **Establish an action plan in Forensic Sciences**

Forensic Sciences' capacity needs to be strengthened to handle a possible dramatic increase in the number of cases and ensure that they are addressed with transparency, dignity, and respect for the families of the deceased. What we lived after Hurricane María can't happen again.

ECONOMIC RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Free access to water and electricity services during the emergency**

We recognize that the government has set forth a plan to mitigate the economic impact in the country. However, there are areas of opportunity that should be addressed. The government should grant free access to water and electricity services during the emergency to anyone who does not have access and/or cannot pay it. A moratorium of the payment will not be enough for many who live on a budget and have stopped earning their monthly income. The result of these moratoriums will be the accumulation of unmanageable debt once the emergency is over.

- **Free access to Internet service during the emergency**

In the face of this crisis, internet is an essential service. It is the key tool to enable people to work, study, and receive medical and essential services remotely. The government must identify funds in order to reach agreements with telecommunications companies that ensure free Internet access in all communities. It should not be limited to current customers. This type of measure helps all sectors of the population.

- **Addressing unmanageable debts in the face of mortgage moratoriums**

A 90-day moratorium on mortgage payments was recently authorized. The government should demand financial institutions offer real alternatives to managing debts and securing the housing of families and individuals.

- **Expanding moratoriums to rents in the private sector**

Regarding the issue of housing rents, we recognize the moratorium established in public housing. However, this should be expanded to rents in the private sector without harming small scale landlords. Similarly, establish a plan to manage the unmanageable accumulation of rent debt and protect housing for victims of this crisis.

- **Securing food supplies**

Although Puerto Rico continues to receive cargo ships and planes for food and other necessities, an action plan is needed to confront the possibility of a decline in the production of such food in its jurisdictions of origin due to the pandemic. Many companies have closed operations because of contagion among their employees. This could happen on the production lines on which we depend to import our food. We must protect the food security of the population in this emergency. It is urgent to adopt a plan to ensure food supplies on the island.

An alternative is to establish an **aggressive support plan for local farmers**. This plan should integrate measures to expand the market opportunities of these farmers, such as the benefits of the nutrition assistance program.

- **Paying the public debt should never go before people.**

The government has a duty to use the \$9 billion that exist as a reserve for payment of such debt, if public welfare, including the physical, mental, and economic health of the people, warrants it.

RECOMMENDATIONS ON EDUCATION

- **The Department of Education should provide Internet access to its students**

You recently allocated \$250 million to the Department of Education to provide “tablets,” “software,” and “training” to teachers, students, and principals of the public school system. We do not know if this amount will be sufficient to meet the need of students, so we recommend that during the emergency the department provide free Internet service to all its students so that they can complete their educational modules.

- **The Department of Education must address the nutrition needs of its students**

In Puerto Rico, there has been a food crisis since before this public health crisis arose. We know that the federal benefits of the Nutrition Assistance Program (PAN, by its acronym in Spanish) do not

guarantee a balanced and nutritious diet to their participants, and does not cover the dietary needs of families. Now, the schools' closure has intensified the crisis, as the nutrition of many students depends on the breakfast and lunch they receive daily at their educational institutions. Such meals are not included in the parent's budget, let alone during this emergency. For this reason, the Department of Education must use federal aid approved by the United States Congress to provide the nutritional assistance students need during the emergency. In addition it should **address the care, education, and nutrition needs of the sons and daughters of essential workers working during the emergency, as outlined in the federal guidelines.**

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Set up long-term plan**

The response plans announced by the government have focused on the short-term response. It's foreseeable that this crisis and its consequences will extend for more time. The potential inability of the island's hospitals to care for patients, people's unmanageable debts, the impact of this crisis on public debt, the possible accumulation of cases in Forensic Sciences, the upcoming hurricane season, and current seismic activity are foreseeable issues for which a timely, concrete, responsible, and transparent action plan must be held.

- **Safeguarding democracy during the emergency**

The public health crisis we are living in is the priority. How the government secures our democracy during that emergency is too. The government cannot use the emergency as an excuse to engage in abuses of discretion and power.

- The curfew should be implemented ensuring the maximum protection of civil rights and avoiding unnecessary punishment.
- Government institutions cannot evade democratic processes in matters that are not necessary to attend to the emergency. For example, they should not pass bills unrelated to the emergency and that merit public participation.
- In a unique election year, the government should seek ways to guarantee the security of the elections; both the security of the vote and public safety. To this end, we insist that the electoral reform law be vetoed.
- Similarly, the emergency should not be subterfuge to discriminate. A public policy for zero-tolerance against any form of discrimination must be established along with mechanisms for its implementation. Specifically, no agency and/or institution that receives and manages public funds to address the emergency can be allowed to discriminate in any way against a person.
- The government owes the people a maximum degree of transparency in decision-making. The public must be constantly informed of successes and mistakes and

mistakes taken care of quickly. Thousands of lives depend on government decisions as well as all sectors, communities, and individuals on the island. Only with transparency can we be effective as a people.

CONCLUSION

We hope that these initial recommendations will be useful. We are more than willing to continue working with the government and other non-profit organizations to respond to this emergency. We reiterate our support for the following letters sent to you by other institutions and non-profit organizations with petitions related to ours:

- ❖ Letter from the *Colegio de Profesionales del Trabajo Social de Puerto Rico*, dated March 21, 2020, signed by Hispanic Federation.
- ❖ *Ayuda Legal Puerto Rico* letter, dated March 25, 2020.
- ❖ *Taller Salud* letter, dated 26 March 2020.
- ❖ Letter from *FURIA, Inc.* dated March 28, 2020.
- ❖ Letter from *Filantropía Puerto Rico* and other organizations, dated March 30, 2020, signed by Hispanic Federation.
- ❖ Letter from *Mesa Social*, dated March 31, 2020, signed by Hispanic Federation.

Cordially,

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