President Donald J. Trump
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President,

In recent days, Puerto Rico and her people have been under assault from a barrage of earthquakes that have taken lives, decimated homes and businesses, and heightened fear in every corner of an island still recovering from Hurricanes Maria and Irma that hit more than two years ago. The actions your Administration has taken since have only compounded their pain and demonstrated complete disregard for their suffering. For decades, the people of Puerto Rico have been deemed second class citizens by our government. That must end today.

Over two years after recovery efforts began, FEMA officials have only funded less than 200 of more than 9,000 requested long-term recovery projects in Puerto Rico. Over the same time period, FEMA has funded nearly 4,000 large and small recovery projects in each Texas and Florida in similar hurricane relief efforts. 1 While your decision to lift restrictions on more than $8 billion in disaster aid this week was a welcome, long overdue development, Puerto Ricans deserve answers from your Administration about why this critical aid was withheld in the first place. However, by imposing onerous requirements on this aid, you are once again telling the people of Puerto Rico they can’t be trusted, hindering recovery efforts, and exposing the flaws included in The Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA). 2 In order for the island to fully recover, we must reform and amend PROMESA, implement accountability measures, restructure and reprioritize debt repayments, and restore sovereignty for Puerto Ricans.

To further ensure the island would be unprepared for future natural disasters, your Administration redirected critical funding intended to reconstruct Puerto Rican military bases to fund your vanity project of a border wall. With estimates of recovery efforts expected to cost $139 billion, the federal government must immediately create a long-term strategy to rebuild

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Puerto Rico that confronts the unique threat the island faces from climate change and natural disasters, rather than sow fear, confusion, and doubt as your Administration has chosen.³

It is increasingly difficult to separate your Administration’s refusal to treat the people of Puerto Rico as citizens from your words and actions, which expose your belief that they are ‘less’ than true Americans. Whether calling Puerto Rico a “mess,” lying about the deaths caused by Hurricane Maria and the disaster relief provided by our government, or claiming that Puerto Ricans “only take from the USA,” you have made it abundantly clear that these citizens you are elected to serve are not worthy of your help.

Although your words are painful enough, it is your actions that will cause enduring harm. Last month, you personally intervened in bipartisan budget negotiations and specifically called for gutting agreed-to Medicaid funding for Puerto Rico by more than half.⁴ This cut will only serve to exacerbate a health care crisis that had already been made worse by Hurricane Maria, Hurricane Irma, and the ongoing earthquakes. This action will have the ripple effect of also worsening a mental health crisis. Now is not the time to restrict access to the single largest payer of behavioral health services in our country.

I cannot disagree more with a White House spokesperson’s claim that this deep cut in funding was a “win for President Trump and the American people.” This statement can only be justified if you fundamentally do not believe that Puerto Ricans are Americans, and only serves to further underscore your Administration’s belief that the suffering of Puerto Ricans is not a priority.

Despite your insistence on deepening this crisis in Puerto Rico, previous Administrations have also long overlooked, and even targeted, Puerto Ricans. Even though nearly half of Puerto Ricans rely on Medicaid for health care coverage, the effective matching rate has been as low as 15 to 20 percent some years, more than 60 percent lower than the rate would be if the territory was treated equal to any American state.⁵ Additionally, reliance on Congressional authorization for this Medicaid block grant, as well as federal food assistance, has only further restricted access to and investment in health care services, and left more than 670,000 Puerto Ricans with cuts to their food stamp benefits last year due to stalled budget negotiations.⁶

Earthquakes continue to shake Puerto Rico. Fellow Americans are sleeping in the streets because shelter is scarce and buildings are unsafe, and they are starving because food assistance has been cut. They are suffering because hospitals are damaged and shuttered, and care is rationed by Medicaid block grants, a policy already standing on legally dubious ground. Americans are

crying out for help, and we cannot ignore them any longer. Your Administration can help by taking the following actions:

1. An immediate major disaster declaration for Puerto Rico to allow for an urgent recovery from earthquakes that have caused nearly $1 billion in economic damage.
2. Immediate dismissal of any plans to impose onerous, misguided conditions on aid funding.
3. Immediate justification for withholding critical disaster aid funding beyond the legal deadline.
4. Immediate reimbursement of $331.5 million for critical national security funding to rebuild Camp Santiago which was illegally stolen by your Administration to build a barrier along the U.S.-Mexico border.
5. A commitment to not illegally redirect any additional military funding already committed to projects in Puerto Rico for the border wall.
6. A commitment that your Administration will no longer reject long overdue reforms to the Medicaid and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) that millions of Puerto Ricans rely on.
7. Immediate creation of a commission to expand access to mental health care on the island.
8. Immediate consideration of reforms to PROMESA, including allowing the Puerto Rican government to make day-to-day decisions rather than an unelected, unaccountable financial board, a halt on debt payments until an independent audit of the financial board has been completed, and giving preference to protecting pensions and critical health and education programs from cuts.

Given the dire need for assistance in Puerto Rico, I request answers to these proposals by Friday, January 31, 2020. I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Joseph P. Kennedy, III
Member of Congress