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Democrats Accuse Trump of Slow-Walking Disaster Relief Funds to Territory, Violating Law by Withholding Money for PR

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Damaged Home in St. Thomas following Hurricane Irma. By. Ernice Gilbert for the Virgin Islands Consortium.

Delegate to Stacey E. Plaskett and Democratic colleagues in Washington accused the Trump administration of violating federal law by withholding billions of dollars in U.S. Housing and Urban Development (HUD) disaster recovery grants to Puerto Rico, and slow-walking recovery aid to the Virgin Islands.

“It has been over two years since Hurricanes Irma and Maria in the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico; destroying homes, businesses and all kinds of public infrastructure in both territories,” said

Ms. Plaskett. “Any further delay by HUD to facilitate the CDBG recovery funds that have been obligated to the Virgin Islands and Puerto is not just unacceptable. It defies the letter and intent of laws duly passed by Congress and signed by the President.”

Ms. Plaskett was joined by fellow Democrats of Congress in a Washington press conference blasting the Trump administration for delays in disbursement of HUD Community Development Block Grants intended for storm recovery projects.

The reason for the hold-up, Ms. Plaskett said, is quite simple: “This (Trump) administration. ... The pattern of neglect for our U.S. territories by this administration is profound. ... It is absurd that in the U.S. fellow citizens on these American islands remain in tremendous need of hundreds of millions of dollars for recovery.”

The head of the Virgin Islands Housing Finance Authority, Daryl Griffith, said the funding process is slow and cumbersome, but is moving at the expected pace.

“There has not been a delay on our end,” said Mr. Griffith, V.I.H.F.A.’s executive director. “As far as what the authority is required to do, we have met all of our marks. The territory has done everything it can do, and the Housing Finance Authority is within compliance.”

The finance authority has submitted to HUD so-called “action plans” for two batches of grant money – one for \$242 million and a second for \$779 million. The money will fund, among other things, home repair and reconstruction under the Envision Tomorrow program, new generators for the Water and Power Authority plants and road reconstruction.

House Democrats, however, were focused on the circumstances in Puerto Rico.

“The Trump administration is continuing to treat Puerto Ricans like second-class citizens, and we won’t stand for it,” said Chairman David Price (North Carolina) of the Transportation, Housing, and Urban Development Appropriations Subcommittee.

“We stood up today to draw attention to the implications of HUD illegally withholding billions in aid. As T-HUD Chairman, I will continue to press HUD to release this aid now.”

“More than 2 years after Hurricane Maria destroyed their homes, businesses, and public infrastructure, Americans in Puerto Rico are still without much-needed relief and recovery assistance because of perpetual – and illegal – stonewalling by the Trump administration,” said House Appropriations Committee Chairwoman Nita M. Lowey of New York.

“It is unconscionable and shameful that as thousands of families live under tarped roofs, or no roofs at all, that HUD continues to drag its feet,” said Congresswoman Clark of Massachusetts.