

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Plaskett Chides Federal Government For Slow Release Of Disaster Funding, Says Territories Being Held To Standard Not Demanded From Other Jurisdictions

Disaster Recovery / **Published On September 17, 2018 11:56 AM /**

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Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett

Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett assailed the federal government during a [C-Span interview on Thursday](#), contending that the U.S. territories were being treated differently from other U.S. jurisdictions relative to the release of disaster funding following Hurricanes Irma and Maria.

"First, I want to say this, I hear a lot about Puerto Rico, I've not heard the news discussing the people of the Virgin Islands, and we, in fact, were hit by two Category 5 hurricanes," Ms. Plasket responded to what was one of a number of questions asking about the U.S. government's response in Puerto Rico following Hurricane Maria's passage in 2017.

"You know, Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico as a Category 4 after coming through the Virgin Islands as Category 5, and we had several days before that Hurricane Irma, which also struck us as Category 5.

"What I can say about the devastation in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, is that, listen, Congress did, I think, an amazing job in members of Congress coming down. I was able to bring over 120 members of the House and the Senate, Republicans and Democrats down to the Virgin Islands.

"And when the president's request for relief came to Congress, Congress doubled it having been on the ground, having spoken to people, having seen what was needed. And what Congress also did is something I've been trying to preach to my colleagues for a number of years, was that the benign neglect in terms of support for our infrastructure, for our systems is what, in fact, now as we can see after the hurricanes, caused the level of devastation to the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico," Ms. Plaskett said.

She then spoke of the disparities in how the territories are treated compared to the mainland.

"We are not on the same scale of medicaid as other places, we do not receive federal aid same ways, the Department of Interior, which [provides] a lot of the support for our schools, they have been cut tremendously and so infrastructure was not there," the congresswoman said.

She added, "I have to tell you this, our schools are still not intact, we were on double shifts because we lost so many schools in the Virgin Islands. We were on double shifts for an entire school year with children sharing space and only being in school four hours a day. And now we find that while our governor is making a tremendous effort to get kids back in school... This weekend I was in the Virgin Islands, you go to the library where there are no shelves, there are no books, children do not have desks, teachers do not have desks, do not have equipment."

Ms. Plaskett said the current situation is not because Congress did not allocate the funding. "But," she went on, "the federal government is now slow-walking a lot of the monies that's supposed to be going to the territories for the infrastructure, and a lot of the damage was in fact due to the benign neglect of this Congress and Congresses before it, in doing what's right in the territories."

Asked if the federal government had done all that it's going to do in the U.S. Virgin Islands relative to the 2017 storms, Ms. Plaskett said, "The federal government as allocated the funding, now what I'm pushing my colleagues to do is to hold those agencies accountable to releasing funds."

Ms. Plaskett spoke of the community disaster loans afforded to jurisdictions after disasters that are unable to fund government operations. She said the U.S. Treasury has

been demanding stringent protections before lending the money that was not the intent of Congress.

"We found that [U.S. Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin] and others were unwilling to lend that money to us in the manner that Congress requested. They asked for first priority liens etc., and things that was not the intent of Congress. And we got Republicans and Democrats to send letters to the secretary of Treasury letting them know that this was not the intent of Congress; you're holding the territories to a standard that you have not held other individuals. That's now going to be a fight to ensure that resources get on the ground so that we can get back up and we can rebuild."

Ms. Plaskett said Congress also took action in amending the Stafford Act to say that the territories, after a natural disaster, should not rebuild to the standard that they were before the disaster, but instead with standards that would see the territories being more resilient against future storms.

She also said the local government has been doing its best to respond, and that levers were in place to discourage corruption.

"It's one government and we're working very diligently to ensure that the money is distributed and in a manner that is Congress's intent. I was very adamant about putting legislation in place that has compliance on the front end, that requires the Government of the Virgin Islands to be very transparent about where that funding is supposed to go, so that there are checks and balances that the people of the Virgin Islands can see whose bidding, whose receiving the funding, and the timeframe in which things are supposed to be done. And I can tell you Virgin Islanders are going to make sure that it is done correctly," Ms. Plaskett said.