

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Congressional Black Caucus Members Call On HUD To Decouple USVI From PR And Release Disaster Recovery Funds

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Maxine Waters, chairwoman of the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Financial Services, and a dozen other members of the Congressional Black Caucus slammed federal housing chief Ben Carson over a recent decision to clamp down on critical hurricane recovery money destined for the U.S. Virgin Islands.

"Your decision may unfairly delay desperately needed funding for the Virgin Islands and contravene the intent of Congress to ensure long-delayed mitigation funding is finally disbursed to disaster-impacted communities," congressional lawmakers wrote in a letter

to Mr. Carson, secretary of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, two days ago.

The move by Mr. Carson earlier this month moves a \$770 million installment of disaster mitigation grants to the Virgin Islands on the back-burner. The slow-walking of the Washington DC grant money to on-the-ground projects in the Virgin Islands is a sharp departure from Congress's call for the swift distribution of disaster mitigation money.

Mr. Carson earlier said questions about the Government of the Virgin Islands' "capacity" to manage record amounts of disaster aid is the reason HUD is treating the territory like Puerto Rico.

The new HUD strategy called for the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico to be treated unlike nine disaster-stricken states. The letter said it is unfair that the territory is linked to scandal-plagued Puerto Rico. "Recovery efforts in jurisdictions prepared to do their part should not be held back due to alleged corruption, fiscal irregularities and financial mismanagement occurring in Puerto Rico ..." the letter said.

USVI Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett said in a release yesterday the Virgin Islands has a track record of adequate compliance and oversight with disaster recovery programs.

Ms. Plaskett added that a quick, rather than delayed disbursement of disaster mitigation funds " ... will help families who are still suffering from natural disasters and ensure that HUD is complying with the law."

Members of Congress went on to tell Mr. Carson, " ... Capacity issues are not unique to the Virgin Islands, and do not justify excluding its CDBG-DR funding from the HUD notice covering other disaster-impacted areas."

"The Government Accountability Office, in its March 2019 report on the CDBG-DR program, notes that HUD's Office of Inspector General raised concerns in 2018 about capacity issues in Texas and Florida, two other major 2017 CDBG-DR grantees.

"Yet, there was no delay or additional funding stipulations of the CDBG-DR funding allocated for any grantees to address unmet needs; and for the Virgin Islands this was nearly the same amount that was allocated for mitigation activities" said Ms. Plaskett.