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# Five Years After Hurricane Maria: A Transformative Virgin Islands is Still Possible

Opinion / **Published On September 20, 2022 06:56 AM /**

Staff Consortium **September 20, 2022**

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**A fallen tree blocks the path to Frederiksted from the Melvin Evans Highway on Sept. 20, 2017. By. ERNICE GILBERT/ V.I. CONSORTIUM**

Like many Virgin Islanders, September 6, 2017, is forever etched in my mind. For what seemed like an unending day, Hurricane Irma relentlessly pummeled the territory, and Virgin Islanders watched in mute shock as the Category 5 storm shredded roofs, uprooted trees, and shattered lives. Then, exactly two weeks after Hurricane Irma ripped through the U.S. Virgin Islands, Hurricane Maria made landfall. For hours that stretched into the early morning, rain poured down in torrents across the already battered islands, inundating vulnerable areas, and wrought destruction across the parts of the islands that had not been shredded by Irma.

The compounded impact of two Category 5 hurricanes is unfathomable. Virgin Islanders, undeterred by the dramatic scale of devastation, rallied in the face of tragedy and proceeded to rebuild their lives and their communities. In the weeks and months that followed, they banded together to deliver food and medical supplies, organized clean-up initiatives, and volunteered private vessels for the transportation of people and goods between the multiple Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico. Widespread and significant damage to homes, businesses, public utilities, and critical infrastructure necessitated an urgent and large-scale government response.

To advance the relief and recovery efforts, I supported numerous congressional delegations to survey hurricane damage, speak with local officials, and equip my colleagues with firsthand knowledge of local challenges and needs. My office also arranged for local officials, businesses, and non-profits from the VI to attend congressional meetings in Washington. Ultimately, the dialogues and relentless advocacy were crucial to securing an extraordinary level of coordination and cooperation between the local and federal governments and a significant change in the Stafford Act to not only provide the necessary funding to rebuild, but to rebuild with resiliency. To rebuild not as things were but to rebuild as things should have been.

Despite the tremendous bipartisan funding, however, recovery stalled during the Trump administration due to, frankly, a belief by that administration that the funding was “too much” and not the financial responsibility of federal government. Money was “slow-walked”. Additionally, with the changes in law made by Congress to allow the VI to rebuild to prevailing industry standards, HUD and especially FEMA have had difficulty at the regional and local levels in accepting and implementing the changes in standards.

In view of this and unnecessary government bureaucracy, I co-authored the Expediting Disaster Recovery Act (H.R. 5774), a bipartisan disaster relief bill sponsored by Rep. Garret Graves (R-LA-6). This essential legislation, which passed the House last week, expedites the allocation of additional assistance to cover unmet needs resulting from a major disaster by establishing a separate funding stream for FEMA. In essence, the bill will cut the federal response time down to a maximum of 30 days, during which a minimum amount of disaster funding will be disbursed to address immediate and long-term recovery needs.

Our isolation from the mainland and relatively small size created difficulty in obtaining supplies and workers, and the decision to report into Puerto Rico added another layer of bureaucracy, further hindering the speed of rebuilding. I must be transparent by recognizing that unfortunately local government exacerbated the slow pace of rebuild. The unprecedented funding was not met with sufficient macro-planning. We did not use the first years after the storm to sufficiently build capacity—training while paying workforce to meet construction and project management demands, developing integrated fund and project management systems, aggressively recruiting experienced Virgin Islanders to return home to advance the rebuild, and educating the population to be prepared for spending the massive funding from Congress.

Fortunately, there is a window of opportunity to jumpstart this rebuild while Democrats remain in the majority, our President prioritizes resiliency in underserved areas that are particularly vulnerable to climate change and our local and federal elected officials maintain transparency and cooperation to advance this once in a generation opportunity to transform the Virgin Islands.

In my capacity as the U.S. Virgin Islands Delegate to Congress, I will continue to meet with local and federal officials to assess the level of support needed for the rebuilding process. I am continually encouraged by the grit and heroism exhibited by Virgin Islanders who faced the grueling task of rebuilding their lives with sheer tenacity and determination. Together, we have a

shared responsibility to safeguard the future of our territory by ensuring that the U.S. Virgin Islands emerges stronger and more resilient from the twin tragedies of back-to-back Category 5 storms. The opportunity that lies before us is too great and meaningful to let pass by.

**Submitted on Sept. 16 by:** Congresswoman Stacey E. Plaskett, who represents the United States Virgin Islands' at-large Congressional District in the United States House of Representatives. She is currently serving her fourth term in Congress and is a member of the Ways & Means Committee, the Budget Committee, and the Agriculture Committee.

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