



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

The Latino Caucus for Public Health at the American Public Health Association Statement Addressing Puerto Rico's Public Health and Healthcare Crisis

The current public health and healthcare crisis in Puerto Rico is a complex multifaceted issue with roots deeply embedded in the archipelago's history, colonial status, and socio-economic exclusion. To effectively address this crisis, we must acknowledge and confront these underlying factors that have shaped Puerto Rico's healthcare landscape.

Historical Data: A Legacy of Neglect

Puerto Rico's healthcare system is plagued by disparities and underinvestment, a legacy of decades of colonial rule and economic exploitation. The archipelago's healthcare infrastructure has experienced decades of chronic underfunding and neglect. Due in part to a lack of political representation in the U.S. federal government, limited political autonomy, and resultant shortcomings in policy leadership that reflect the best interests of the Puerto Rican community. All of which have led to shortages of hospitals, clinics, and healthcare providers. The vulnerability of Puerto Rico's health care system is further exacerbated by the growing global climate crisis. For example, in 2017 the archipelago experienced consecutive Category 4 and 5 hurricanes, Irma and María, followed by large scale Earthquakes in 2020. These catastrophic incidents resulted in a breakdown of infrastructure (i.e., electrical and communication systems), scarcity of essential services, including clean water and healthcare, and large-scale property damage, which have yet to be properly addressed nearly 6 years later. Such factors continue to contribute to excess mortality.

Lack of Medicaid Parity: A Barrier to Access

The US government continues to fail to provide Puerto Rico with adequate Medicaid funding capping the amount of spending eligible for federal reimbursement and establishing an inequitable poverty level that leaves too many low-income residents without proper and dignified healthcare. Puerto Rico's lack of Medicaid parity means that Medicaid recipients on the archipelago, who are US citizens, do not have access to the same health services as those residing in the States, including care in nursing homes, home health services, non-emergency medical transportation, and the full range of benefits for children.

Exodus of Healthcare Providers: A Vicious Cycle

The exodus of healthcare providers from Puerto Rico further compounds the crisis. The exodus is driven by the archipelago's economic instability, lack of adequate compensation for



healthcare workers, and the limited training availability (including privatization of medical schools and lack of adequate medical residencies). This loss of expertise and experience has created a vicious cycle, making it even more difficult to attract and retain healthcare professionals.

Colonialism as a Socio-Structural Determinant of Health

Puerto Rico's colonial status has significantly shaped its healthcare system and directly contributed to the current crisis. Colonialism and the power structures that uphold it have fostered economic dependence, limited political autonomy, and perpetuated health disparities. These factors have created a system that is inherently inequitable and unable to meet the needs of the Puerto Rican communities.

Moving Forward: A Call for Comprehensive Solutions

Addressing Puerto Rico's public health and healthcare crisis requires a comprehensive approach that acknowledges the historical, structural, and socio-economic factors at play. The Latino Caucus for Public Health calls for:

1. **Achieve Medicaid parity:** US Congress must act to ensure that Medicaid funding and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) for Puerto Rico is on par with the 50 states. It is necessary for the US to ensure that Medicaid recipients in Puerto Rico receive healthcare benefits equal to those in the mainland United States.
2. **Invest in healthcare infrastructure:** The US Congress must draft, codify, and fund policies that ensure long-lasting, sustainable investment in healthcare infrastructure to reduce increased disparities in morbidity and mortality among Puerto Ricans residing on the archipelago. Such policy should include significant investments needed to upgrade Puerto Rico's healthcare infrastructure, including hospitals, clinics, and medical equipment. This would improve the quality of care and expand access to essential services.
3. **Main focus on prevention:** A collaborative effort among Puerto Rico, the US government, and local community-based organizations must prioritize prevention as a public health approach.
4. **Train, recruit, and retain healthcare professionals:** Aligned with the Latino Caucus for Public Health's mission to train and diversify the healthcare workforce, policy makers need to develop strategies to address the exodus of healthcare providers, including increasing reimbursement rates, expanding professional development opportunities, and implementing incentive programs to attract and retain healthcare professionals in Puerto Rico.
5. **Addressing socio-political determinants of health:** Pervasive poverty, food insecurity, housing instability, and environmental hazards must be addressed to improve the overall health of Puerto Ricans. This requires targeted investments in



- social programs, infrastructure development, and environmental protection measures.
6. **Address the root causes of colonialism:** In an effort to decolonize and facilitate the socio-political process of self-determination, we call upon the President of the United States and the US Congress to revoke the 2016 Puerto Rico Oversight Management and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA) and to disband the Fiscal Control Board or "La Junta." In addition, enhancing public health in the archipelago needs the implementation of a restorative social justice model that adheres to international human rights. Furthermore, Puerto Rico's reinstatement on the United Nations list of non-self governing territories in need of decolonization would facilitate socio-political self-determination that could result in health equity.
 7. **Support local communities:** Engage and support communities to increase self-efficacy and ownership of their health and advocate for their healthcare needs via different models, including the community health workers model.

Puerto Rico's public health and healthcare crisis is a stark reminder of the deep-rooted inequities that colonialism and economic collapses can create. By acknowledging these underlying factors and implementing comprehensive solutions, we can work towards a future where all Puerto Ricans have access to health equity and social justice.