

Take Action for Puerto Rico!

Talking Points [2022]

Puerto Rico must be treated equitably in all policy agendas that demonstrate responsibility for the conditions that exist today and to change them.

On the five-year mark of Hurricane Maria's devastating landfall in Puerto Rico, there is still much work to do to help Puerto Rico rebuild and to ensure a sustainable future that saves lives. We need your help to advance a shared vision for a stronger, more equitable, and resilient Puerto Rico. Anyone can refer to these talking points when preparing for a meeting or a call with elected officials, when drafting your own op-ed or press release, or when speaking to the media.

Our message is simple: the federal government has a moral and legal responsibility to help the U.S. citizens of Puerto Rico recover from this tragedy just as it would help any other group of American citizens.

“ Without additional action at the federal level, it could take as long as a generation, or more, for Puerto Rico to rebuild its infrastructure and its economy. ”

IT'S TIME TO END DISCRIMINATION AGAINST RESIDENTS OF PUERTO RICO IN FEDERAL SAFETY-NET PROGRAMS

To ensure the health and dignity of people in Puerto Rico, it is essential that Congress finally eliminates discriminatory funding disparities in federal health care, nutrition, and other programs to support vulnerable, low-income people.

- The federal government must stop discriminating against Puerto Rico, not just in disaster relief, but in all federal programs. The only way Puerto Rico can build a sustainable future is by ending the systemic discrimination by the federal government against Puerto Rico and its residents.
- 'The federal safety net is flimsier and more porous in Puerto Rico than in the rest of the nation. To be blunt, the federal government discriminates against Americans who live in Puerto Rico' (according to U.S. Federal Judge, William G. Young).

- Congress must stop this discrimination based on geographic location and pass legislation for Puerto Rico to participate fully in Medicaid, SNAP (food stamps), and Supplemental Security Income (SSI), among others.
- President Biden and Congress must stop the federal government's treatment of Puerto Ricans as second-class citizens.
- People who live in Puerto Rico deserve the same level of healthcare funding in programs like Medicaid and Medicare, that other U.S. citizens receive.
- This [unconstitutional treatment](#) and discrimination in federal programs, especially those intended to provide a safety net for vulnerable people is one of the main causes of Puerto Rico's current economic crisis and is partly responsible for the island's high poverty levels.
- Geographic location should not be a determinant of access to, or denial of, federal programs that support the most vulnerable U.S. citizens such as low-income disabled, blind, and elderly persons.

THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT MUST STOP RELYING ON RACIST PRECEDENTS TO DEFEND DISCRIMINATION AGAINST PUERTO RICO

The [Insular Cases](#) represent a shameful legacy our nation should leave in the past. The prejudice in these cases is so abhorrent that even Supreme Court Justice Neil Gorsuch said in a recent federal benefits decision, that overturning the "[shameful](#)" Insular Cases was long overdue.

- Racist court decisions, collectively called the “Insular Cases” described Puerto Ricans and residents of Guam and other territories as “half-civilized,” “savage” and “alien races” and should not be used by our federal government to justify treating Puerto Ricans as second-class citizens.
- The Biden Administration and previous administrations’ reliance on the racist Supreme Court precedents known as the Insular Cases, geographic versions of Plessy v. Ferguson, to justify discrimination is unconscionable.
- To achieve the goals intended by federal funders, and ensure federal dollars effectively reach impacted communities, requires meaningful public participation with robust stakeholder engagement during all phases of decision-making processes.
- The promotion of resilient and sustainable local food production, access to safe, potable water, and bolstering the island’s agriculture sector are essential for Puerto Rican communities to recover.

PUERTO RICO PAYS MORE THAN ITS FAIR SHARE OF TAXES

Those who say Puerto Rico should not be treated fairly because they don’t pay federal income taxes are ignoring the facts.

- Residents of Puerto Rico in fact, do pay many federal taxes. In 2019 alone, the federal government [collected](#) \$3,528,739,000 in taxes from Puerto Rico residents.
- Poor people generally do not pay income tax regardless of where they live, and this is not a requirement to qualify for federal safety-net programs like food stamps, SSI, or Medicaid.
- Puerto Rico residents [paid more](#) in federal taxes than six states including Vermont, Wyoming, South Dakota, North Dakota, Montana, Alaska, and all other U.S. territories combined. Yet low-income people living in those states don’t get denied access to federal programs.

PUERTO RICO DESERVES A JUST AND SUSTAINABLE FUTURE WITH INVESTMENTS MADE IN SOUND, LIFE-SAVING INFRASTRUCTURE

A sustainable and just recovery must focus on long-term solutions. Puerto Ricans have shown their ability to come together and fill gaps in the failure of the federal government’s response. The billions of federal dollars in reconstruction funding should heed and ensure those voices are incorporated and respected.

- Recovery efforts must meet the needs of the present communities without compromising future generations by taking a holistic approach, achieving a balance between economic, social, and environmental development, and be led by the communities who know their needs best.
- In order for the recovery process to be sustainable and just, it must be community-driven and forward-thinking. The residents of the island have a better understanding of how to ease recovery and set up the island for success.

- Rebuilding should not be an excuse for exploitation or for waiving any civil, human, or environmental rights in the name of speed – or greed.

PUERTO RICO NEEDS A GREEN AND RELIABLE ENERGY GRID BASED ON RENEWABLES

Everything possible should be done to help the island meet its goal of 100% renewable energy by 2050 and prevent loss of life and significant economic interruption from the ongoing energy crises.

- Federal funds to rebuild Puerto Rico’s energy grid must prioritize investments intended to meet Puerto Rico’s renewable energy goals - and not be used to invest in continued reliance on polluting fossil fuels.
- Creating a resilient, decentralized energy system in Puerto Rico is not just about climate – it is literally a matter of life and death.
- Congress should use its oversight authority to ensure that the largest grant in FEMA history (\$12 billion+), to rebuild Puerto Rico’s energy grid complies with the island’s renewable energy mandate (100% renewable by 2050), instead of extending the life of a broken and fossilized energy system.
- Numerous studies have shown the benefits of rooftop solar with storage to create resiliency, lower costs for low and moderate-income (LMI) consumers and will ultimately save lives.
- This is the time for Puerto Rico to transform its outdated, centralized, fossil fuels dependent energy system, into a future-proof, bottom-up, resilient grid, fully based on renewable energy, primarily solar, and energy storage.
- Coal ash and natural gas facilities in Puerto Rico should not get a free pass from regulators. These private polluters should not get public funding that generates dirty air and water consumed by Puerto Ricans.

RADICAL TRANSPARENCY IS A PREREQUISITE TO ENSURE FEDERAL DOLLARS EFFECTIVELY REACH IMPACTED COMMUNITIES, AND ACHIEVE THE GOALS INTENDED BY FEDERAL FUNDERS.

- Congress and the President must ensure all federal disaster recovery and infrastructure investment funds are effectively used by requiring transparency and civil society input in decision-making processes for the sustainable recovery of Puerto Rico.
- Democratization of the recovery and rebuilding process is the best way to minimize corruption, fraud, and waste.
- Good governance requires that federal and local contracts not be awarded to companies that have been convicted or fined for breaking any labor, environmental, or other federal or local laws.
- These [radical transparency measures](#) are a democratic check on both local and federal actors.

ALL PEOPLE HAVE THE RIGHT TO FREELY CHOOSE THEIR SOVEREIGNTY AND INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL STATUS WITH NO INTERFERENCE.

- The President and Congress must work with representatives of the several status options in Puerto Rico to develop and fund a federally-binding, democratic, self-determination process that includes effective education to voters about each option to move the island towards decolonization and guarantees the will of the people is respected and implemented.
- President Biden must keep his promise to work with representatives of the several status options in Puerto Rico to develop and fund a federally-binding, democratic, [self-determination process](#) that guarantees the will of the people is implemented and includes viable options to move the island towards decolonization.
- President Biden needs to keep his campaign promise to return internal democratic self-governance to Puerto Rico and support legislation to terminate PROMESA.
- The President should take executive action to keep his campaign promises and hold the undemocratic Financial Oversight and Management Board (FOMB) accountable by auditing the debt, reviewing the FOMB's austerity measures, and further reducing unsustainable/illegal debt.

DEBT RELIEF SHOULD NOT COME BEFORE PEOPLE

A just recovery is not possible if paying bondholders is a higher priority than investing in the recovery and the future of Puerto Rico. The debt cannot come [before basic needs and essential services](#).

- The debt must be independently audited and certified. The future of Puerto Rico must not be compromised by repaying debt that was illegally or unconstitutionally obligated.
- Repaying an unaudited debt should not be a higher priority than the rebuilding and recovery of the island's physical and human infrastructure.
- The Biden administration must keep its promise to conduct an audit of Puerto Rico's debt and roll back austerity measures taken by the undemocratic Board. An independent audit of Puerto Rico's [billions of dollars of debt will](#) enable the island to plan for a fair and sustainable fiscal path forward.
- Though most of the debt restructuring has been agreed to, other bankruptcy-like agreements remain outstanding and should cut further debt.

TA4PR! CAMPAIGN

- **Take Action 4 Puerto Rico!** is composed of grassroots advocates, faith-based leaders, labor unions, community-based organizations, public officials, and educators. Our goal is to educate, encourage, and elevate the discussion and, ultimately, take action around the many critical issues for Puerto Rico's recovery. Five years later, those issues include radical transparency and community engagement, congressional oversight to ensure funding is used for its intended purpose and reaching those most in need, ending discrimination in funding for federal programs like SSI, Medicaid, and SNAP, rebuilding a resilient energy grid that prioritizes a transition to renewables, climate change preparedness, and economic redevelopment.
- **Take Action for Puerto Rico!** was launched before the one-year mark of Hurricane Maria on September 20th, 2018, and continues all year long, with focused activity each year from September 20th through October 20th, coinciding largely with Hispanic Heritage Month.