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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-5400

March 21, 2020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Minority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Majority Leader McConnell, Minority Leader Schumer, Speaker Pelosi, and Minority Leader McCarthy:

In addition to the proposals sent on my March 18, 2020 letter, I ask that as you continue to negotiate and craft a bipartisan legislative coronavirus relief package, that you include the following on behalf of the people of Puerto Rico:

- 1. Remove Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia from the “Buy American” provisions of the Stafford Act that prohibit these two U.S. jurisdictions from purchasing critical Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) from foreign countries.** As the outbreak of the COVID-19 continues to spread across America, challenging the availability of supplies and materials for conducting the necessary testing, I ask that you include language to ensure that Americans in Puerto Rico and D.C. can purchase PPE, in the same manner as the rest of the states. PPE is critical for caregivers and deploying the medical devices and supplies necessary for diagnosis, isolation and treatment. Puerto Rico’s geographic location, which complicates shipment and delivery of supplies, requires that we be able to get these lifesaving materials promptly from the best available source, so our health care sector can step up according to the Administration directives.
- 2. Financial Assistance for Hospitals and Healthcare Providers.** As the Island moves to address the needs of the COVID-19 outbreak, our hospitals need the essential supplies of testing kits including nasal swap, respiratory devices including ventilators and face masks, gloves and other preventative measures necessary for the protection of our healthcare workers who are facing this outbreak every day. Additionally, direct financial assistance to support these hospitals is critical due to disparate treatment experienced every day on the Island. Healthcare should be deemed a priority industry, I support the American Hospital Association, American Medical Association, and the American Nursing Association (ANA) recommendations and also urge funding of \$100 billion be made available for hospitals and healthcare providers necessary to address the outbreak.

- 3. Emergency Grant Funds for Students.** In order to further help our undergraduate and graduate students cope with the COVID-19 outbreak, Congress should consider providing our institutions of higher education with emergency grants funds to cover necessities such as transportation, food, and relocation assistance. In particular, I believe we should temporarily increase the Pell Grant and Federal Work-Study awards. This would allow our students to cover lost income as well as the costs of acquiring internet and technological equipment necessary to continue their education remotely. Moreover, Congress should temporarily increase the thresholds to qualify for federal student financial aid and the available amount per level of need. This would ensure more of our students get the necessary aid to deal with any financial hardship that stems from the COVID-19 emergency.
- 4. Technology Assistance.** As schools and institutions of higher education closed in response to the COVID-19 outbreak, many indicated that they would offer their classes online or remotely. Yet, as you aware, many students in Puerto Rico and the rest of the United States lack adequate access to broadband and internet connection. Many do not have computers or the necessary technological equipment to take such online courses. Therefore, Congress should provide financial assistance to help our students and teachers cover the costs associated with moving to distance education, including the acquisition of equipment and investments to upgrade our schools' and universities' technological infrastructure. Grants for faculty training and online course development, as well as the potential extension of the Federal Communications Commission's E-Rate Program to non-profit colleges and universities, should also be contemplated.
- 5. Support for University Operations and Employees.** In my discussions with representatives from Puerto Rico's public and private colleges and universities, it also became clear that federal support will be needed to assist institutions of higher education with lost revenue and increased costs associated with the response to COVID-19. This includes the loss of tuition revenue from declines in enrollment and the loss of revenues from auxiliary operations due to closed campuses. To address this reality, Congress should consider providing grants to cover financial losses directly related to the impact of COVID-19, and zero-interest loans to refinance existing university debt obligations and thus free annual interest payments to support university operations in response to the emergency. Moreover, the federal government should ensure that the emergency leave proposals that have been enacted, or that are currently being considered, cover university and college employees who cannot perform remote functions during campus closures.
- 6. Waivers and Flexibilities for Federally-Sponsored Research.** Colleges and universities in Puerto Rico and the rest of the United States conduct crucial research projects funded through a variety of federal grants. However, undertaking many of these activities will be difficult in light of the circumstances surrounding the COVID-19 outbreak. Congress should hence require federal agencies to develop or implement existing rules and regulations providing waivers to grantee institutions that are unable to perform according to schedule due to restrictions resulting from the current emergency, such as closure of campuses. This action should allow us to protect federally-sponsored research and projects across the nation's universities.
- 7. Support for State and Local Education Districts.** As we deal with the consequences of the COVID-19 emergency, Congress should also ensure our states and territories have the necessary resources to support students and teachers across elementary and secondary schools. Assistance should be provided to help them cover the costs of offering classes online or remotely, including to help children obtain the necessary technological equipment and train their educators. Funding to help restart school operations across state and local education districts should also be contemplated, as has been done in the aftermath of other disasters.

8. Mitigation of Losses for Low-Income Housing Industry. Several State and private entities undertake housing construction efforts that benefit low-income tenants through the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC). However, in response to the current COVID-19 pandemic, most activities related to construction have been either reduced or placed on hold. The Government of Puerto Rico recently enacted an Island-wide curfew to mitigate the proliferation of the Coronavirus and all activity that is unrelated to essential or emergency services has been halted. This poses a great challenge to the construction and housing industry given their inability to continue operations to observe safety guidelines. Therefore, I respectfully urge you to include flexibilities tied to LIHTC to meet certification and project deadlines to mitigate losses during the ongoing emergency period related to delays, increased labor or material costs and additional interest expenses.

Finally, I would like to once again **emphasize the urgent need to include provisions that will increase manufacturing of pharmaceutical and medical supply production in Puerto Rico.** Pharmaceutical manufacturing makes up roughly 42% of Puerto Rico's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) aided by the Island's capable workforce and the production capacity to ramp up efforts to address this COVID-19 epidemic, all measures must be taken to help those affected and those at risk for infection. This public health emergency has shown us that securing the supply of pharmaceuticals, biologicals and medical devices and supplies on American soil is in the interest of our national security and health security. Puerto Rico is well positioned to help the U.S. close this gap immediately,

Thank you for your consideration of these requests as we work to provide the necessary resources and tools to address the consequences of the COVID-19 outbreak.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jenniffer González-Colón". The signature is stylized and cursive.

Jenniffer González-Colón
Member of Congress