

**Opening Statement of Senator Thomas R. Carper (DE)
Senior Democrat and Former Ranking Member, U.S. Senate Homeland Security and
Governmental Affairs Committee**

**U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
Hearing on “2017 Hurricane Season: Oversight of the Federal Response”**

October 31, 2017

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Before I make my opening statement, I want to extend my well wishes to Senator McCaskill and her family today. Unfortunately, Senator McCaskill is out to help her husband recover from some medical issues, and I know we all wish him a swift and full recovery.

Two weeks ago, Senator McCaskill sent you a letter requesting that this Committee conduct a bipartisan investigation and consider scheduling a series of hearings to lay out the reality of the federal government’s response to Hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Maria.

Today’s hearing is an important first step, and I hope that Democrats and Republicans can continue to work together to conduct oversight over the decisions made both before and after these three disasters.

When disasters strike, Americans band together to help one another. I believe that’s because most people in this country believe in, and try to live by, the Golden Rule – to treat other people the way we want to be treated. This principle should also guide our federal response when disaster strikes and some of our citizens find themselves in times of dire need.

Led by FEMA, many federal agencies – including the Department of Defense, the Army Corps of Engineers and the Department of Health and Human Services – have been working around the clock for the past two months to respond to these hurricanes.

FEMA, The Army Corps of Engineers and the National Guard serve as our nation's frontline in the response to and recovery from all manner of disasters.

Delaware deployed members of the Delaware National Guard to support hurricane relief efforts in Texas, Florida, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. I would like to extend my thanks to those men and women who put the needs of those in distress ahead of their own.

I also want to thank the witnesses appearing before our committee today, and I would also ask that you convey our heartfelt thanks to the members of your staffs for their tireless efforts.

And Mr. Chairman, I hope that in the very near future we can have the governors of Texas, Florida, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands before us as well so that we can hear their valuable perspectives on how the recoveries have been going and learn more about their needs.

We are at the very beginning of a long and difficult rebuilding effort. The cost of the devastation wrought by these hurricanes may well exceed \$300 billion – more than double the total economic damage of both Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005. We must ensure that the federal government is meeting the needs of the survivors of these disasters, and,

at the same time, ensure that federal funds are being used efficiently and effectively. Every dollar wasted is a dollar that won't be available to help other Americans who are still in need.

We have already started to hear of allegations of programmatic mismanagement and questionable contracts.

Many of us were shocked to learn of the \$300 million contract to repair the electric grid that was awarded by the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority (PREPA) to Whitefish Energy. As you know, this is a company with two full-time employees that has only existed for two years. This award was made after PREPA declined "mutual aid" offers from other utilities on the mainland to help restore Puerto Rico's power. I was glad to hear that on Sunday, after much controversy, this contract with Whitefish was canceled.

I cannot overstate the urgent need for action to quickly restore power, repair homes and other structures, as well as ensure the availability of safe and clean drinking water for all citizens in the United States.

But in adversity lies opportunity, and the federal government's responsibility to help the victims of these disasters by rebuilding the infrastructure they depend on every day presents us with the opportunity to make it more resilient when the next storm hits. And, it will! By making smart choices as we rebuild, not only can we increase resiliency, but we can also make that infrastructure more efficient and affordable.

By virtue of burning diesel fuel to create most of its electricity, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands pay far more for their electric than Americans in the contiguous United States.

By facilitating a conversion to natural gas for much of their electricity needs and combining that with electricity generated from renewable sources, while also taking advantage of technologies such as distributed generation and microgrids, Puerto Rico can rebuild their power grids while dramatically reducing energy costs and stimulating economic growth. While I understand that there is a need to move with dispatch, it's also important for us to keep in mind the need for Puerto Rico to reduce its long-term energy costs, while factoring resilience into our efforts.

In addition, I believe it's also important for Administrator Long and President Trump to extend the deadline for Hurricane Maria victims to register for Individual Assistance grants, and I strongly urge them to do so.

Individual Assistance provides a helping hand for people whose homes have been damaged or destroyed in the course of a disaster. FEMA is encouraging people to go online to file a claim. However, a great many of the victims of this storm currently lack electricity and cellular capabilities. It's likely that a significant number of people will need more time to file for this critical assistance. That's why I am glad to learn that FEMA last night extended the deadline to late March. In summary, we need to be mindful of the unique situation on the ground in Puerto Rico and try to ensure that all necessary steps are taken to help all of those who lives have been shattered by all three of these devastating and unprecedented storms.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, before I close, I'd like to say a few words about the obligation our federal government has to help rebuild when disaster strikes our country.

When extreme weather hits, it's scary and dangerous, and it's often far more powerful than we imagined it would be. For those of us who haven't had the misfortune of living in the path of the worst destruction, it's hard to imagine.

But for the people whose reality has become a nightmare, they just want to know that there's a path to a better and safer future. Clearing that path is a shared responsibility, though. The residents of Puerto Rico and their leaders must do their part, but our federal government has a moral obligation to help, as well. Like the folks at Home Depot say, "You can do it, we can help." And keeping with the spirit of the Golden Rule, let's continue to make sure we do just that.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.