



COALITION ON HUMAN NEEDS: FOR PUERTO RICO, THE DISASTERS KEEP COMING

David Elliot

March 7, 2019

Editor's note: This is the first in a CHN series of blog posts about Puerto Rico and its nutrition assistance crisis.

A new crisis is sweeping across Puerto Rico. Unlike Hurricanes Maria and Irma, however, this one is entirely man-made.

More than one out of every three Puerto Ricans receives benefits from the island's Nutrition Assistance Program (NAP), the island's version of SNAP (once known as food stamps). Earlier this month, however, recipients began receiving sharp cuts in benefits because Congress has failed to extend assistance that was first approved as part of post-hurricane recovery.

In a blog post published Wednesday, March 6, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities detailed just how acute the cuts are:

"A family of four with no or very low cash income, for example, would have received the maximum NAP benefit of \$649 last month – the same amount that a similar household [in the continental U.S.] would receive from SNAP. Now, this household's monthly benefit will drop by 37 percent to \$410, which is the pre-disaster benefit level. An older adult who lives alone and received \$194 last month will see his benefits for March drop by 42 percent to \$112."

Back in 2017, following the devastating hurricanes, Congress and the Trump Administration approved \$1.27 billion to bolster Puerto Rico's NAP, in addition to the \$1.8 billion in annual funding the program

regularly receives from the federal government. But Puerto Rican officials have warned for months that the additional \$1.27 billion was insufficient to respond to Puerto Rico's incomplete recovery from Hurricane Maria. They requested a \$600 million appropriation, which would allow the U.S. island to maintain its current level of NAP benefits through September.

In January, House Democrats passed a \$14.2 billion disaster aid bill that included the \$600 million in NAP funding (along with relief for other states hit by hurricanes, floods, and wildfires). But the White House, not exactly a fan of disaster recovery in Puerto Rico, objected. It called the emergency NAP funding "excessive and unnecessary."

"There is no indication that households need ongoing support at this time or that Puerto Rico requires additional time to return to normal NAP operations," the White House said **in a statement**.

Ultimately, legislators failed to include emergency disaster relief in the **spending bill** that re-opened government in January because of the President's intransigence over this small amount for Puerto Rico. And now, the 1.35 million low-income residents of Puerto Rico who qualify for NAP – U.S. citizens, by the way – are paying the price.

One proposal for disaster relief has been introduced in the Senate by Senators Perdue (R-GA) and Isakson (R-GA). The \$13.6 billion package includes \$610 billion for Puerto Rico's nutrition assistance, as well as funds to cover crop and other damage from hurricanes and flooding in states including Alabama, Georgia, North and South Carolina, and Florida. Now, as Alabama struggles to recover from a massive tornado that killed 23 people, Senate Appropriations Chair Richard Shelby (R-AL) is working with other appropriators to increase the disaster funding, while continuing to include help for Puerto Rico. Senator Shelby has expressed willingness to get a bill to the President before Congress leaves for its March recess on March 18. If you want to help, please call the U.S. Capitol Switchboard at 202-224-3121 and ask to speak with your senator. Here's a simple message you can deliver. Urge her or him to support extended NAP funding as well as other needed disaster relief for Puerto Rico!

'MONEY FOR A WALL...NO FOOD FOR THE PEOPLE'

Bridget Rittman-Tune

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March 11, 2019

Editor's note: This is the second of a series of blog posts about Puerto Rico and its nutrition assistance crisis. This post is based on interviews that were conducted in Spanish; they subsequently were translated to English.

Waldemiro Velez Soto of San Juan, Puerto Rico didn't know his family's food rations were being cut.

Voices for Human Needs was the first to inform him that the nutrition assistance he and his family depend on was going to be lowered or possibly even taken away.

Velez Soto's reaction over the long-distance telephone line was disbelief. His first response of "No, I didn't know," to impending cuts to Puerto Rico's Nutrition Assistance Program (NAP) came out softly and was followed by complete silence.

Being the one to tell someone that the nutritional assistance they relied on would be cut if the federal government didn't approve aid was not what I was expecting. The federal government has not only failed

to provide necessary aid to Puerto Rico, but also failed to let these American citizens know that the aid they had been receiving was about to be cut.

Waldemiro Velez Soto and his family survive off of their NAP benefits. (NAP is Puerto Rico's version of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as food stamps.) With few jobs available in Puerto Rico, Velez Soto cannot earn enough for him and his family to survive. And based on our conversation, he is not the only Puerto Rican forced to live like this.

"Most people don't have other options; this is a problem of health. Once the food they have is gone people will literally die of hunger," he said.

If nutrition assistance is cut, Velez Soto did not know how he would feed himself or his family. "I would have to find it somehow, it's ugly but it's the reality."

(Earlier this month, the cuts to NAP actually began, although statistics are not yet available regarding how many families have been affected. For background on this issue, go [here](#).)

Velez Soto hears all about the proposed U.S. and Mexico border wall, but nothing about helping to alleviate Puerto Rico's financial and hurricane-induced disasters. "It's absurd that they say they have money for a wall, have millions for the military, but no food for the people," he said.

He wants Congress to know, "They are forgetting that the priorities are the people, the priority is nourishment, education, health, safety."

"There are still tons of houses with structural problems, tons of people that don't have access to basic services," he said. "It's been multiple years since the hurricane. It's a fault of respect. We are being treated like third-class citizens."

"The federal government hasn't done its job. We will lose our food. The way we are living is unsafe and oppressive."

These are not personal issues. A society's framework and infrastructure are built and maintained by its government. We see this in our interview with Rafael Rivera.

Rafael Rivera works for the central government. He doesn't receive NAP, but almost 75 percent of the community he represents does. "The problem is there are no jobs and unemployment is really high and the government isn't giving any job opportunities," he told *Voices for Human Needs*.

Rivera has uncles, cousins, nephews, and other close family who receive NAP benefits. "Without NAP they wouldn't have a way to buy things and feed themselves," he said "Even with what they are given it doesn't cover electrical bills, water bills, and other costs that can't be paid for with just NAP."

"Puerto Rico is the poorest national territory within the United States....in Puerto Rico they don't have the option to look for employment opportunities, so it brings more people into poverty and people are having to live in the streets and beg in the streets for food."

We reached out to these individuals because we knew that the citizens in Puerto Rico have a painful story to tell and no one is listening. This is not a budget or partisan issue; this is a human rights crisis.

The misery in Puerto Rico spiked when Hurricanes Maria and Irma hit, and it will continue to rise until the federal government sends the necessary aid – not just for nutrition assistance but for rebuilding and infrastructure and jobs and schools and all of the things the island needs to become whole again.

PUERTO RICO: A RECOVERY IN REVERSE?

David Elliot

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March 13, 2019

*Editor's note: this is one in a continuing series of blog posts about Puerto Rico and its nutrition assistance crisis. Previous posts can be found [here](#) and [here](#). More information can be found in CHN's **Human Needs Report**.*

For the Puerto Rican coastal community of Loiza, the hits just keep coming.

First there was Hurricane Irma, which sideswiped the eastern part of the island, where Loiza is located, late at night on Sept. 4, 2017. Not even two weeks later, Hurricane Maria came ashore, scoring an even more direct hit than Irma, and once again, Loiza absorbed the worst of the storm's fury.

Loiza Mayor Julia Nazario had not even been mayor for one year when the hurricanes hit. She took office on a platform to reduce gun violence; that she has done. But now her community faces a new threat: it was one of the least affluent communities on the island, with 60 percent of its residents qualifying for Puerto Rico's Nutrition Assistance Program (NAP), which is the island's version of SNAP.

Now those benefits are threatened; earlier this month, NAP recipients began receiving fewer benefits because Congress has failed to provide \$600 million to extend additional aid that was approved in the wake of Maria and Irma. Unlike SNAP, which responds automatically when a disaster increases need, Puerto Rico must depend on Congress to increase funding. So far, despite bipartisan support for providing the aid, Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) has refused to put a disaster relief bill on the Senate floor. The cuts **affect 1.35 million Puerto Ricans** – more than one-third of the island's residents qualify for the benefit.

According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a family of four with no or very low cash income, for example, would have received the maximum NAP benefit of \$649 last month — the same amount that a similar household in the continental U.S. would receive from SNAP. Now, this household's monthly benefit will drop by 37 percent to \$410, which is the pre-disaster benefit level. An older adult who lives alone and received \$194 last month will see his benefits for March drop by 42 percent to \$112.

In an interview with *Voices for Human Needs*, Mayor Nazario explains that her community will be more affected than others by the cuts. Unemployment, she says, is twice as high in Loiza as it is across the island. The community is disproportionately young – while much of Puerto Rico has a larger population of seniors, Loiza is primarily comprised of “kids and young people.”

What would Mayor Nazario tell Congress if she could?

“I would like them to know that our people make responsible use of these benefits,” Mayor Nazario said through an interpreter. “It is about time Congress look at our people as humans with needs. Because we do have a large proportion of small children and young kids, it is particularly important to us. We have been making adjustments for a long time now. If we have to make more, it is going to be very hard.”

As it happens, Mayor Nazario will have the opportunity to tell some members of Congress those very words. Members of the House Natural Resources Committee, led by Rep. Raul M. Grijalva (D-AZ), **leave**

for Puerto Rico this Friday, March 15. On Sunday, they will be hosted by Mayor Nazario, who will lead the congressional delegation on a tour of her home town.

One of the things Committee members might learn on their fact-finding mission is how NAP benefits help compensate for the lasting damaging Hurricane Maria (and to a lesser extent Irma) left behind.

Amanda Rivera is executive director of the Instituto Desarrollo Juventud; translated, that means the Youth Development Institute. The organization is Puerto Rico's lead child advocacy group, and it has conducted extensive research into poverty and other problems and challenges Puerto Rican children face.

"We recently commissioned a study on the impact of Hurricane Maria on children and their families, which showed that a year after the hurricane, a great proportion of the lowest income families were still struggling to make ends meet," Rivera told *Voices for Human Needs*. "For example, 38 percent of families earning an income of \$15,000 or less a year said they were facing difficulties buying groceries. Taking away these benefits at a time when Puerto Rican families have not fully recovered would plain and simple mean that there will not be food on the table in some homes."

Rivera adds that "families with children and youth need to be a priority in the recovery process."

"The island's entire recovery and sustainability hinges upon this population," she says. "The inability of policymakers to articulate a clear strategy for breaking the cycle of poverty and creating opportunities for children and youth to thrive has led to a 35 percent reduction in our child population over the last ten years. In addition, the majority of our children and youth – 58 percent – live in poverty. Our research findings suggest these trends could be exacerbated as a result of Hurricane Maria, leaving the island with even less children and young families, and even more poverty among these. However, the hurricane recovery process could present an opportunity to turn around these trends if resources are invested effectively and with these principles in mind."

Rivera's recommendation? "From the federal standpoint, we need to facilitate policy frameworks that support low-income families with children and youth, especially those that are working and still struggling to make ends meet. Extending NAP so that benefits provide more security in this process, and authorizing the extension of the Child Tax Credit to families of 1 and 2 children are policies that can help curb what could otherwise be a downward trajectory."

Dr. Anayra Tua is the CEO of Proyecto Nacer, a group that serves low-income teen parents and their families. She also sits on the board of the Child Welfare League of America, a CHN member. She says many of her group's clients are attending school or engaging in other activities to improve their futures, but she worries their plans might be derailed by the NAP cuts.

"Our teen parents wonder if attending school or other services which will increase their chances at a better socioeconomic position tomorrow is not doable at this time, because they need to seek a job to provide food for their children," Dr. Tua said.

Like Rivera and Mayor Nazario, Dr. Tua predicts higher levels of migration unless Congress acts to speed up – not slow down – economic recovery in light of Hurricane Maria. **Nearly 500,000 left Puerto Rico** for the mainland between 2008 and 2018, meaning the number of Puerto Ricans now living stateside actually eclipses the 3.3 million residents who remain on the island.

"I think that as more and more families are deciding to move out from Puerto Rico into certain states, Congress will increase their understanding of the impact of these cuts and unfair distribution of resources between Puerto Rico and what other jurisdictions have, and this will result in their having to adjust their decision-making process in the future," Dr. Tua said.

For now, Tua and other Puerto Ricans interviewed by *Voices for Human Needs* said people on the island feel powerless.

“Our families are widely aware that NAP cuts can occur, mainly because the Secretary of the Department of Families has been a great communicator and advocate to retain such benefits,” Dr. Tua said. “Even though our teen families are widely aware of this threat, they feel powerless to be able to stop it or ask Congress not to cut this current life-saving and stabilizing provision.”