



## LATEST NEWS

# Florida Influencers: Washington failed Puerto Rico; Florida didn't

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September 11, 2018 04:07 AM

***The Florida Influencers Series: This election year, the Miami Herald, the***

*Bradenton Herald* and *el Nuevo Herald* are driving a conversation on the important issues facing our state. We've assembled a panel of 50 influential Floridians to offer their views.

"It is important to remember that our federal government was in the midst of dealing with major consecutive natural disasters, namely Hurricanes Harvey and Irma, when Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico and the Caribbean. Notwithstanding, there are valuable learnings from the 2017 hurricane season that can help better prepare communities to withstand the impacts of a natural disaster. As part of future planning efforts, there needs to be consideration of the possibility of multiple simultaneous disasters throughout the U.S. and its territories, as well as multiple disasters hitting the same area, as occurred with Puerto Rico this past year. Also, when planning and responding to these natural disasters, there needs to be a better understanding of the infrastructure and the vulnerabilities a community has, which may exacerbate the impact of the disaster and impede response and recovery efforts. Concurrently, there should be better methods of communication established as a whole. After Hurricane Maria passed through Puerto Rico, the island lost all communication and we saw a need for a more centralized, coordinated communications so those helping would know how, and where, to help. A key learning for all our communities is the need for pre-set plans that effectively leverage private-public partnerships that can help address basic needs like food, water, medicine, generators at the ready with platforms, manpower and on-the-ground contacts to quickly transport and distribute those supplies."

**– Maria Alonso, President and CEO, United Way of Miami-Dade**

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“The state got it about right, while the federal government should have had a more vigorous response. The response was not comparable to Houston. There should have been a more immediate emergency response and more significant long term response.

**–Mel Martinez, chairman Southeast US and Latin America, JP Morgan Chase, and former US senator.**

“The federal government’s response to Puerto Rico following Hurricane Maria has been nothing short of shameful. A Politico investigation revealed that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) provided a fraction of the amount of aid to Puerto Rico in the days following Maria as it provided to Texas in the same number of days following Hurricane Harvey: \$141 million for victims of Harvey versus \$6 million for victims of Maria; 30,000 personnel in Houston versus 10,000 in Puerto Rico; 5.1 million meals and 4.5 million liters of water to Texas compared to 1.6 million meals and 2.8 million liters of water to Puerto Rico. There is no excuse for such a disparity in the way the federal government treats its citizens in crisis. There should have been equal efforts to render aid to the victims of Hurricane Maria as to the victims of Hurricane Harvey, and the federal government should have made it a priority to obtain accurate reports of the death and destruction Puerto Rico suffered. Given that Governor Scott has boasted of his close ties with the current presidential administration to the governor of Puerto Rico, he should be using that influence to correct the federal government’s egregious lack of response to this ongoing crisis.”

**– Mary Anne Franks, professor of law, University of Miami**

The federal government’s response was inadequate and leadership callous. The “territory” did not lead a more aggressive effort to expose the misinformation from Washington in order to share light of the magnitude of the disaster. Putting a spotlight on the magnitude of the loss of life and services can be a powerful tool when pressure should have been applied.

**– Mike Fernandez, Chairman, MBF Healthcare Partners.**

“The federal government in word and deed has let down American people in its response to Puerto Rico. It was treated as if its distance from the “mainland” made it another country.

**– Franklin Sirmans, Director, Perez Art Museum Miami**

“I believe with the influx of almost 300,000 people from Puerto Rico following Hurricane Maria, the state itself did the best job that it could. We did see welcome centers set up in airports, and it seemed, for the most part and barring a few hiccups, to run smoothly. The federal government is a different story; they were so unprepared (maybe because there is a “big ocean” between us) but the wait times for help, for the hospital ships, and for supplies were unforgivable.

**- Terry DeCarlo, LGBT activist**

“Given the limited resources in Puerto Rico, I think our federal response has been excellent.”

**— Wendy Spencer, CEO, Leadership Florida**

“Once Maria devastated the island, relief efforts were very reactive, slow and not well organized. Despite vast experience in dealing with hurricanes and their aftermath, the disturbingly slow and inadequate response made conditions even worse for Puerto Ricans. However, in Florida, Puerto Rico’s closest neighbor, mechanisms were put in place to help displaced Puerto Ricans. Colleges, especially, including Miami Dade College, immediately mobilized and provided free tuition and other support to students to keep them on track for completion.”

**— Eduardo Padron, President, Miami Dade College**

“The federal government was slow to respond. It seemed that lessons learned from Katrina were forgotten.”

**- Joanne McCall, President, Florida Education Association**

“Governor Scott and state and local governments have handled this crisis superbly. The late and poor federal response was unforgivable, specially we respect to healthcare and basic survival asistance. One private chef volunteer fed more people than FEMA.” – **Al Cardenas, Senior Partner, Squire Patton Boggs**

“The State of Florida’s response to Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria was immediate and comprehensive. Governor Scott visited the island on several occasions and immediately declared a State of Emergency for all 67 counties by Executive Order. Money was allocated for employment opportunities, coordination on housing assistance, crisis counseling, and legal advice. In addition, State universities and local schools immediately came together to provide for the influx of students. Could we have done more – of course. However, the state of Florida acquitted itself well in this time of emergency. Much has been written about the Federal Government’s response to Hurricane Maria – with lots of finger pointing in all directions. The Governor of the island repeatedly called for aid at the same level as was expended for states such as Florida and Texas. This plea for assistance is clearly understandable, however, I would be remiss if I did not point out that while Puerto Rican’s are citizens of the United States, their island is not a state, and is governed differently from other states. Further, Puerto Ricans living on the island and not working for the Federal Government or national companies do not pay federal personal income taxes and have limited voting rights. The question of statehood is the key to this discussion and is one which should be addressed. With statehood comes federal resources, benefits and enhanced representation as well as responsibilities.”

**- Rhea Law, Chair, Florida Offices, Buchanan Ingersoll & Rooney. (Tampa)**

“I think there’s been plenty of evidence of the lack of adequate response to the hurricane on the island, and I also think the series of deadlines around transitional housing in Florida for Maria evacuees shows that we’ve not been fully successful in helping storm survivors get back on their feet here. A quicker and broader response in Puerto Rico to restore essential services was needed, and lacking that, Florida needed more resources to direct to affordable housing”

— **Jeff Johnson, State Director, AARP**