



THE UNITED STATES ATTORNEY'S OFFICE
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Department of Justice

U.S. Attorney's Office

District of Puerto Rico

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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The United States Attorney's Office Announces Formation Of A Task Force To Fight Hurricane Irma-Related Illegal Activity

SAN JUAN, P.R. – United States Attorney Rosa Emilia Rodríguez-Vélez is urging Puerto Rico residents and businesses to be aware of and report suspected fraudulent activity related to disaster relief operations and federal funding for victims. The USAO for the District of Puerto Rico, in coordination with the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI), the U.S. Department of Homeland Security-Office of Inspector General (DHS OIG), the Puerto Rico Department of Public Safety, and the Puerto Rico Department of Justice have formed a task force to investigate and prosecute illegal activity stemming from Hurricane Irma.

While compassion, assistance, and solidarity are generally prevalent in the aftermath of natural disasters, unscrupulous individuals and organizations also use these tragic events to take advantage of those in need. Examples of typical illegal activity under the jurisdiction of each of the agencies in the working group include:

- Impersonation of federal law enforcement officials
- Identity theft
- Fraudulent submission of claims to insurance companies and the federal government
- Fraudulent activity related to solicitations for donations and charitable giving
- Fraudulent activity related to individuals and organizations promising high investment returns from profits from recovery and cleanup efforts
- Price gouging
- Theft, looting, and other violent crime

“Our efforts are directed at enforcing a zero tolerance policy,” said United States Attorney Rosa Emilia Rodríguez-Vélez. “In the midst of the distress and losses caused by Hurricane Irma and the attending need for recovery and rebuilding, there can be no place for fraud and abuse.”

“With our federal and state partners, we have a long history of tracking down and prosecuting those who attempt to defraud the government of monies that have been set aside to help victims of natural disasters,” said Special Agent in Charge Douglas A. Leff of the FBI, San Juan Field Office. “The FBI will do everything in its power to protect taxpayer funded relief programs that have been created to help people who have suffered actual losses.”

“The DHS OIG takes any and all allegations of fraudulent activity seriously and intends to hold accountable those who try to use this disaster to take advantage of others,” said Special Agent in Charge Jay H. Donly of the DHS OIG Miami Field Office. “The DHS OIG will use all of its investigative resources to stop those who use this unfortunate situation for personal and illegal gain.”

Hector Pesquera, Secretary of the Puerto Rico Department of Public Safety, assured that “his department has been tasked by the Governor of Puerto Rico to join these efforts to investigate and process any individual that engages in fraud or acts of corruption as related to hurricane victims. For those purposes, we have made available to the Task Force all of our resources.”

The Puerto Rico Disaster Fraud Task Force will be in close collaboration with the Justice Department's National Center for Disaster Fraud (NCDF). The NCDF receives from members of the public reports of fraud, waste, abuse or allegations of mismanagement involving disaster relief operations. It has been fully operational since its inception following Hurricane Katrina and is specifically designed to be ready for situations like Harvey and Irma. NCDF has an excellent staff of investigators, analysts, call center operators, and managers preparing to handle the anticipated volume. Since 2005, the NCDF has processed over 70,000 complaints. NCDF operates a call center 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, to take disaster fraud complaints through a national hotline number (1-866-720-5721) and via email (disaster@leo.gov). This hotline serves, in essence, as a national 911 for disaster fraud. Learn more about the National Center for Disaster Fraud at www.justice.gov/disaster-fraud. Tips on avoiding fraudulent charitable contribution schemes are at <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/tips-avoiding-fraudulent-charitable-contribution-schemes>.

Members of the public are reminded to apply a critical eye and do their due diligence before giving contributions to anyone soliciting donations on behalf of disaster victims. Solicitations can originate from e-mails, websites, door-to-door collections, mailings and telephone calls, and similar methods.

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