

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

September 15, 2020

The Honorable Peter Gaynor
Administrator
Federal Emergency Management Agency
500 C Street S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20472

Dear Administrator Gaynor:

While President Trump's recent executive order on unemployment assistance is unworkable, weak, and narrow, it does provide an opportunity for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to help the people of New York and, tragically, many Americans. As the President has now authorized FEMA to use Other Needs Assistance (ONA) for all the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) Major Disaster Declarations, FEMA should utilize this authority to provide disaster funeral assistance to New York State and any other state that requests it.

On August 8, President Trump issued the "Memorandum on Authorizing the Other Needs Assistance Program for Major Disaster Declarations Related to Coronavirus Disease 2019." While the President's focus of this memorandum was to provide additional unemployment assistance, beyond the scope of what is allowed in the already existing Disaster Unemployment Assistance, this document has opened a new and important source of federal support to the hundreds of thousands of grieving families across New York and this country. That is Disaster Funeral Assistance. We wrote to you in April with a number of our colleagues, urging you to activate ONA and the subcategory best known as Disaster Funeral Assistance and your response was that it was under review. We are happy to see that ONA has now been approved and reiterate our call that you provide this assistance immediately, and retroactively, for all New Yorkers who lost a loved one to COVID-19.

When we wrote to you in the middle of April, New York had 200,000 confirmed cases and over 10,000 deaths. Since that initial letter, this number has climbed to a staggering 444,948 confirmed positive cases and a heart wrenching 25,394 deaths. The country as a whole has over 6,570,000 confirmed positive cases and almost 200,000 deaths. Those figures leave us speechless. Compounding the horrific loss of life, the families and loved ones of those loss are saddled with a funeral bill, all while the economy lays in shambles around them. As we have said to you on the phone and in letters before, this is unacceptable and FEMA must rise to the occasion and help our fellow Americans. Congress has provided FEMA with the statutory authority and ample funding to provide assistance to these people, the President has now authorized the use of the program in his August 8 memorandum, all that remains is for FEMA to act.

In addition to Disaster Funeral Assistance, now that ONA has been activated, households should be encouraged to apply for Disaster Medical Assistance. This program would help cover the medical costs people face when diagnosed with COVID-19, including medications and insurance co-payments. ONA is built to be incredibly flexible and therefore can even cover childcare costs,

up to eight cumulative weeks, as well as reimbursement for eligible miscellaneous items to assist with an applicant's disaster recovery as defined by state, territorial, and tribal governments.

While we deeply appreciate all that you and the people of FEMA have already done to assist New York during this difficult and tragic time, this is not the moment to shy away from your mission. New York needs you right now. We urge you to immediately, and retroactively, provide Disaster Funeral Assistance to New York, and any other state that should request it, and expeditiously publish guidance on how New Yorkers can utilize this program.

Thank you for your time and attention to this matter, if you have questions please do not hesitate to contact our staff.

Sincerely,



Charles E. Schumer
United States Senator



Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez
Member of Congress

CC:

The Honorable Thomas Von Essen, Regional Administrator of FEMA Region 2
The Honorable Andrew Cuomo, Governor of New York State
The Honorable Bill de Blasio, Mayor of New York City