

Efforts to Dismantle Puerto Rico Statistics Agency Being Fought on Two Intensifying Fronts

Commonwealth needs statistical data all residents can trust as it recovers from hurricanes and fiscal crisis

ALEXANDRIA, Va. (March 22, 2018) – Earlier this month, Puerto Rico Gov. Ricardo Rosselló reintroduced his government reorganization plan that would [eliminate the Puerto Rico Institute of Statistics \(PRIS\)](#). On a separate front, he appealed a March 8 Puerto Rico Supreme Court decision [ordering the restitution of four scientists to the institute's board of directors](#). The court determined Rosselló removed these members from the board last summer without due process.

The Puerto Rico House and Senate have until April 15 to reject the governor's new reorganization plan. If they do not, the next step will be to pass legislation authorizing new makeups and missions for the reorganized agencies, including PRIS, which would cease to exist since it will become an office within the Department of Economic Development and Commerce.

In addition to disputing the March 8 decision in the Puerto Rico Court of Appeals, Rosselló took the extraordinary step of asking the Puerto Rico Supreme Court to take up the case, instead of allowing the case to continue its normal track to the Court of Appeals. The governor also tried to prevent PRIS board members from meeting. Both the [Supreme Court](#) and [Court of Appeals](#) declared the governor's requests without grounds.

Critics of the plan to eliminate PRIS point to the importance of reliable and publicly available statistical data to the commonwealth's recovery from two devastating hurricanes, a fiscal crisis and myriad public and private decisions the data inform. Critics further point to demands by Puerto Rico residents for transparency on critical issues such as the restoration of electrical power, the number of deaths due to the hurricanes and proposed education reforms. They also point to the [many contributions of PRIS](#) to the jurisdiction since it began operating in 2007 and the dismal state of national data prior to its founding.

Supporters of an independent and better-funded PRIS also question Rosselló's rationale for dismantling PRIS, which he gave to *Science* magazine. He stated that the consolidation and

privatization of the commonwealth's statistical data production will help provide more reliable statistics.

“Puerto Rico needs its statistical agency to be independent so its data will be seen as objective. Removing the many protections in place for the independent production of statistics—including an independent advisory board free of political partisanship—as the governor’s plan does will only weaken public trust in data,” said ASA President Lisa LaVange. “Furthermore, privatization of the data production removes public accountability and transparency. It could make access to the data more difficult, thereby negating the powerful roles publicly available government data provide to individuals and private entities in improving societal and economic conditions.”

PRIS supporters also note the irony of the governor’s claims that his plan will strengthen the independence of PRIS and reliability of its data, when his dismissal of experts on PRIS’s board, multiple court challenges and his reorganization plan, itself, actually undermine the autonomy and functionality of the agency.

When eliminating PRIS was first proposed, critical reaction was strong and swift. The Financial Oversight and Management Board for Puerto Rico wrote Rosselló urging PRIS to be retained and strengthened as an independent and standalone entity. In the US Congress, [15 members of the House of Representatives opposed the proposal](#) and Sen. Elizabeth Warren also [wrote, expressing her concern](#). Almost 3,000 people have signed a [petition](#), in part organized by the ASA, asking Puerto Rico’s political leaders to reconsider. There have also been multiple op-eds and articles published by outlets like [Scientific American](#), [The Hill](#), and [Science](#) magazines. LaVange sent letters to [Rosselló](#), the [PR Senate president](#) and the [PR House speaker](#), protesting the plan.

At a moment when Puerto Rico is debating the best path forward for energy recovery, considering the impact of emigration and trying to project the effects of austerity measures on the Puerto Rican economy, eliminating PRIS would be counterproductive to Puerto Rico’s efforts to rebuild itself and its economy. Reliable and publicly accessible statistics are of utmost importance, now more than ever.

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