

## United States Senate

August 21, 2023

President Joseph R. Biden  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania, N.W.  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Biden:

Thank you for your and Dr. Biden's visit on Maui and for your Administration's support in the wake of this tragedy.

Given the extent of the devastation, the recovery process will be long and will require the full support of the federal government. Your Administration has already taken several steps to support the recovery efforts. I write now asking for additional measures that will build on that support for the Maui people.

### **Include Funding for Maui in a Continuing Resolution**

As you know, search and recovery operations continue in Lahaina and have delayed official damage assessments. However, the federal government should not wait to begin to deliver what we know will be billions of dollars in needed assistance. As such, I ask that you urge Congress not to wait for final assessments before providing needed immediate funding to Maui.

### **Support Increased Financial Assistance for High Cost Areas**

Hawaii has the highest consumer prices of any state, more than 13 percent above the national average, while personal income remains near the national average. Federal disaster recovery programs, e.g., the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Individual Assistance program, do not recognize cost variation across the country. As such, I request that the Administration support legislation that would add a cost adjustment factor to federal disaster recovery programs that would provide greater support to survivors in high cost areas.

### **Waive the State and Local Cost Share for Needed FEMA Programs**

The 30-day waiver of state and local cost shares for categories A and B of the FEMA's Public Assistance program is deeply appreciated and will be beneficial. However, the huge scale of recovery demands further action. I ask that you waive the state and local cost share requirement for the duration of disaster recovery. Further, I appreciate the proactive efforts from FEMA and the Red Cross to empty congregate shelters and quickly place people in hotel rooms to begin recovery. However, the costs involved in those efforts are significant and the current cost share requirement will burden Hawaii's recovery. As such, I further request a state and local cost share waiver for FEMA's Transitional Shelter Assistance Program for the duration of needed assistance.

### **Presume that Lahaina Survivors Do Not Have Their Paperwork**

I appreciate that more than 2,000 affected households have already received assistance from FEMA and that thousands more have already registered for assistance. However, I am hearing reports that FEMA is asking for common identification, title, and other documentation from survivors who clearly have lost everything. The agency should instead assume that these documents are missing and work with survivors accordingly, using survivor-centric program delivery approaches and existing flexibilities. Further, the agency should understand that many families and individuals share residences in Lahaina and should not be asking for burdensome additional documents that they cannot fairly be expected to produce. FEMA has flexibilities under the law that will meet survivor needs without unduly risking fraud that the agency should use.

### **Ensure Safe Air and Drinking Water**

The fires compromised the sewer system in and around Lahaina, a special challenge given the age of its infrastructure. Further, given possible asbestos and lead in the burned structures, there are justified concerns that people may be exposed to harmful particles in the air. Thus, I ask that the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) continue to test drinking water and air quality throughout the debris removal phase of restoration.

### **Surge Crisis Counseling**

Demand for crisis counseling far exceeds Hawaii's capacity, which was already strained due to behavioral health provider shortages. I ask that the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Defense deploy behavioral health specialists to augment local providers throughout Maui's recovery.

### **Extend Disaster Unemployment Assistance to One Year**

This disaster will understandably impact Maui's tourism industry, which generates 70 percent of economic activity on the island. As a result, hard-working people could lose their jobs through no fault of their own. Given the long recovery ahead, your Administration should consider support for efforts to extend Disaster Unemployment Assistance from 26 to 52 weeks.

### **Expedite Processing and Waive Fees for Lahaina Immigrants**

As mentioned, many Lahaina survivors lost important identifying documents in the fires. As such, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services should waive fees and expedite processing for all individuals impacted by the disaster who need to replace any immigration documents.

### **Harden the Electric Grid**

We must do everything we can to prevent a future disaster like this from occurring again. As such, I ask that the Department of Energy provide *additional* funding to Hawaii for grid resilience, including through the existing \$10.5 billion Grid Resilience and Innovation Partnerships (GRIP) Program, which was established by the *Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act*.

### **Mitigate Fire Risks**

One of the many factors thought to have contributed to the fires are invasive grasses that have overtaken abandoned agricultural land. These grasses, which grow quickly during wet conditions and then wither during dry conditions, acted as kindling and helped to fuel the

wildfire's rapid spread. I ask that the Department of Agriculture support Hawaii's management of invasive grasses and otherwise help mitigate the risk of future fires.

**Prevent Pollution in Coastal Waters**

I request that your Administration use existing coastal resilience funding to monitor coastal water quality along the West Maui coast to detect runoff from the fire, monitor for changes to the sedimentation rate, and assess any impacts to the coastal ecosystem. Further, I request your Administration's support for funding for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Ocean and Coastal Security Fund (OCSF), which would provide for projects to increase Maui's resilience in the future.

**Increase Small Business Loan Limits**

Small Business Administration (SBA) disaster loans will be an important part of Maui's recovery. Given the high costs on Maui, and the authority that the SBA Administrator has to increase loan limits, I ask that you request the Administrator to consider such a waiver.

**Fund Hawaii's Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs)**

Additional funding for CDFIs working on Maui will aid recovery just as these institutions aided national recovery in the wake of the pandemic. I request that the Administration include funding for CDFIs in Hawaii in a future supplemental request and determine if any existing funding or technical assistance is available to provide for CDFIs working on Maui.

**Send Cabinet Officials to Maui**

It is difficult to comprehend the devastation in Lahaina until you see and fully experience it. The presence of key officials from your Administration on the ground has been crucial so far and it will remain so going forward. As such, I ask that you continue to send Cabinet Secretaries and other senior Administration officials to Maui to understand the community's needs and help rebuild.

Thank you again for what you and your cabinet have done for the people of Maui. And thank you for considering these requests. Additional information and requests of the federal government are expected in future months as recovery continues. I know that you and your Administration will continue to do all you can.

Sincerely,



Brian Schatz  
U.S. SENATOR

Cc: The Honorable Lloyd J. Austin III, Secretary, Department of Defense;  
The Honorable Xavier Becerra, Secretary, Department of Health and Human Services;

The Honorable Deanne Criswell, Administrator, Federal Emergency Management Agency;

The Honorable Jennifer Granholm, Secretary, Department of Energy;

The Honorable Isabella Casillas Guzman, Administrator, Small Business Administration;

The Honorable Mitch Landrieu, Senior Advisor to the President;

The Honorable Alejandro N. Mayorkas, Secretary, Department of Homeland Security;

The Honorable John Podesta, Senior Advisor to the President;

The Honorable Gina Raimondo, Secretary, Department of Commerce;

The Honorable Michael S. Regan, Administrator, Environmental Protection Agency;

The Honorable Julie Su, Acting Secretary, Department of Labor;

The Honorable Tom Vilsack, Secretary, Department of Agriculture;

The Honorable Janet Yellen, Secretary, Department of Treasury;

The Honorable Shalanda Young, Director, Office of Management and Budget.