President Donald J. Trump
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

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

Dear President Trump and Administrator Gaynor:

We write to urge your immediate approval of the Individuals and Households Program (IHP) eligibility for New York under FEMA’s Individual Assistance Program so that grieving New Yorkers can give their loved ones who succumbed to the coronavirus proper burials. As a nation, we have lost 81,289 lives due to COVID-19, 21,640 (26.6%) of whom were New Yorkers. While New York received its Major Disaster Declaration on March 20, 2020, the scope of its Individual Assistance has been limited to the Crisis Counseling Assistance and Training Program. These funds are helpful but many of the families that lost loved ones cannot shoulder the cost of burying them, particularly in the face of growing economic uncertainty.

The toll of this pandemic is unprecedented but providing FEMA assistance for funeral expenses is not. Reimbursement from FEMA for funeral expenses was provided in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and Superstorm Sandy. Following Superstorm Sandy, FEMA provided $1.6 billion in IHP assistance, that included funeral assistance. With the national median cost of a funeral with a viewing and burial at $7,640 in 2019,1 one need only do a cursory search on GoFundMe to see a seemingly endless scroll of donation pleas for funeral assistance as families struggle to bury those lost to COVID-19.

When exposed, the virus doesn’t distinguish between race, ethnicity, or class, but working-class Americans in essential jobs and communities of color are disproportionately impacted without the luxury of space and secure jobs that afford them the option to work from home.2 We anticipate unemployment will quickly rival if not surpass that of the Great Depression, with working-class and low-income families feeling the brunt of the economic cost.3 Without FEMA-reimbursable funeral assistance, many New Yorkers are forced to make a false choice between

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laying their loved ones to rest or putting food on the table. 4 Further, the expansion of the Treasury Coronavirus Relief Fund for State, Territorial, Local, and Tribal Governments⁵ to include the eligibility of unforeseen funeral costs faced by individuals and families experiencing a loss of income due to COVID-19 is a faux gesture of help that leaves this crisis unresolved. As a result, solely of COVID-19, New York State is facing a $13 billion decline (14%) in revenue in the fiscal year that started April 1, 2020, a dramatic reversal from projected revenue growth of 6.7% before the crisis.⁶ It is unacceptable to suggest that New York State’s Coronavirus Relief Fund should be repurposed for burials instead of covering them through the FEMA Disaster Relief Fund under New York’s Major Disaster Declaration.

On April 28, 2020, the White House issued a memorandum⁷ regarding FEMA’s crisis counseling assistance, explicitly noting this limited program authorization “shall not be construed to encompass any authority to approve other forms of assistance.” Given that nearly $80 billion remains in the Disaster Relief Fund, we hope the Administration will share in our bipartisan support for answering such an undeniable need for help.

We trust you share our urgency in responding to these matters and ask you do so within two weeks from the date of this letter.

Sincerely,

Nita M. Lowey
Member of Congress

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez
Member of Congress

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Charles Schumer  
United States Senator

Kirsten Gillibrand  
United States Senator

Yvette D. Clarke  
Member of Congress

Eliot L. Engel  
Member of Congress

Adriano Espaillat  
Member of Congress

Hakeem Jeffries  
Member of Congress

Peter King  
Member of Congress

Carolyn B. Maloney  
Member of Congress