



Disability Community Speaks Out: Cancelled Funds Leave Electro-Dependent Disabled People Behind

By ileim moss

Disability-led and supporting organizations are sounding the alarm¹ after the Department of Energy (DOE) announced on January 9th that it would redirect \$365 million dollars away from rooftop solar and storage systems for low-income and electricity dependent Puerto Ricans and toward fortifying the centralized grid.² These funds were originally for the Programa Acceso Solar (Solar Access Program), a program within the Puerto Rico Energy Resilience Fund (PR-ERF) which installs solar and energy storage systems for the households most at risk during power outages, including people who rely on electricity to power medical devices or refrigerate medication. Programa Acceso Solar has already provided solar and storage systems for over 6,000 household, and the remaining \$365 million dollars was promised to providing systems to another 12,000 waiting households who are also electro-dependent and low-income.³ Some of those 12,000 households had already begun preparing for the solar and storage systems they've been promised,⁴ and have been left in the dark wondering what comes next.

Nearly 200 disability-led and support organizations, including The Partnership for Inclusive Disaster Strategies, Consejo Estatal de Vida Independiente (CEVI), and Movimiento para el Alcance de Vida Independiente (MAVI), have signed on to a letter to the Department of Energy and Puerto Rican government calling for Programa Acceso Solar to be restored, and their message is clear: "The years of planning, along with firm commitments to thousands of people with electricity-dependent disabilities and medical conditions who were already approved for life-saving solar and battery systems must be honored."⁵

More than 100 disability-led and disability support organizations in Puerto Rico and the 50 states came together in 2022 to urge congress to fund solar power and storage systems for disabled and multiply-marginalized Puerto Ricans.⁶ Congress responded, allocating \$1 billion to what would become the Puerto Rico Energy Resilience Fund, funding programs to increase the resilience of at-risk Puerto Rican communities during power outages, including provisions for providing solar power and storage systems to electro-dependent and low-income households.⁷ Many disability-led and support organizations participated in designing the PR-ERF implementation plan, centering the needs of disabled Puerto Ricans who are dependent on electricity to survive.⁸

Electro-dependent Puerto Ricans who received PR-ERF solar power and storage systems were able to secure backup power for outages on an island that experiences more frequent power outages than anywhere else in the United States.⁹ In 2024 alone, the average Puerto Rican household spent over 73 hours without power,¹⁰ the majority of those hours attributed to challenges from Hurricane Ernesto, which had tropical storm winds when it impacted the island. Puerto Rico's power grid still has not recovered from Hurricane Maria,¹¹ and even if the grid becomes more reliable, continued power outages are inevitable as climate change makes the hurricanes Puerto Rico faces increasingly destructive.¹² Puerto Rico is one of the top 10 most climate-vulnerable places in the world,¹³ so it is not a question of *if* there will be outages, but *how often* and *for how long*. Reliance on refrigerated medications and powered ventilators mean even minutes of power can be the difference between life and death for electro-dependent Puerto Ricans, and they will be left behind if the funds are not re-committed to the PR-ERF.

On April 23rd, 46 members of Congress wrote to the DOE formally announcing that the Committee on Natural Resources of the House of Representatives will conduct an oversight investigation over the cancellation and reallocation of PR-ERF funds, citing a "lack of transparency, wasteful reuse of the funding, disregard for congressional intent, and potentially illegal cancellation of contracts."¹⁴ To facilitate their investigation, the House Committee on Natural Resources has requested the DOE deliver a briefing that includes full information about how the decision to cancel PR-ERF contracts was made, how the program was executed and then stalled, the evidence the DOE used to determine the PR-ERF funds would be better used elsewhere, and full transparency about the projects chosen as alternatives.

Funding cancellations affect disability communities from Puerto Rico to California.

The PR-ERF redistribution follows the abrupt termination of the Disability Disaster Access and Resources (DDAR) program contract in Southern California last October, during peak season for Public Safety Power Shutoffs (PSPS) in the region.¹⁵ DDAR provides disaster readiness and recovery education, resources, and support for disabled people statewide through local centers in partnership with utilities companies. The California Foundation for Independent Living Centers (CFILC) established the DDAR program in 2020 to improve outcomes during power outages for disabled people dependent on electricity.¹⁶ DDAR's partnership with Southern California Edison (SCE), the utility company managing electricity for much of Southern California, started in 2023 and enabled on-the-ground, life-saving support to electro-dependent people during past wildfire seasons.¹⁷ During the January 2025 Palisades and Eaton fires in Los Angeles, for example, the Disability Community Resource Center (DCRC) established a durable medical equipment replacement program and peer-based mental health recovery program for survivors with disabilities.¹⁸

SCE argued that the DDAR program duplicated services unnecessarily, as SCE has their own backup battery program and 211 provides educational services. The CFILC disagrees, and in their two years with SCE, they "provided over 1,000 hotel stays,

delivered hundreds of backup batteries, and conducted nearly 12,000 direct consumer contacts.”¹⁹ While 211 can redirect callers to shelter resources, and SCE provides backup batteries to some consumers, Disability Disaster Access and Resource Centers (DDARCs) provide peer support in all stages of power outage and disaster preparedness for people with disabilities, as their coordinators are themselves disabled. DDARC coordinators’ lived experience is cleverly alluded to when Sheela Gunn, Emergency Preparedness Coordinator at the Center for Independent Living in Berkeley, says that “since I’m blind and have been blind all my life, I do it in the dark all the time.”²⁰ This pun on both the pronunciation of the acronym DDARC and DDAR’s support preparing disabled people for power outages references the expertise that comes from lived experience both in being disabled and working professionally in disability-centered disaster management.

When a consumer meets with a DDAR manager, they are meeting with another disabled person who has training specific to supporting a variety of access and functional needs through disasters. When calling 211, on the other hand, the operator is sharing the same information and resources to disabled and nondisabled callers. The personalized and expert resources, connection, and direct coordination that DDAR provides are simply not duplicated by 211 calls.

“What has been of greatest loss is the community-trusted holistic and wrap-around integration of on-the-ground support for those that need it most” says Ben Kahn, Disaster Coordinator for the DCRC in Los Angeles, including “battery delivery, PSPS evacuation coordination and hotel stays, gas and food vouchers” that can no longer be provided.²¹ In the CFILC’s Press Release about the DDAR program cancellation, Executive Director Lisa Hayes voiced the perspective of the disability community clearly: “We need partnership, not abandonment.”²²

Despite reduced DDAR scope in Southern California and funding concerns across the state, California independent living centers remain firm in their commitments to supporting disabled people navigate disasters. DCRC continues to help people with disabilities prepare for disasters by providing individual and group disaster preparedness training, emergency planning, and preparedness supplies. And though most of their on-the-ground disaster work has ended, the DCRC serves as a Community Resource Center, so community members can use their space to recharge vital equipment during PSPS.

Disability Communities United in Advocacy

The bond between Puerto Rico and Southern California is not simply disability communities facing disasters while resources slip away. In both regions, we see disability-led initiatives that push back against attempts to strip away necessary services and center the needs of the most impacted when disaster strikes. It was wide networks of disability-led and support organizations like the CFILC and The Partnership for Inclusive Disaster Strategies calling for establishment of DDAR and the PR-ERF, and when news hit that they were threatened these same networks pulled together to

protect these programs. PR-ERF and DDAR share histories rooted in disability advocates and allies demanding better resource distribution to protect the most at risk during extreme weather events, and both tangibly improved the lives of disabled people.

Disabled people may be 2-4 times more likely to die during disasters,²³ but the disability community knows that it isn't fate that decides which of us make it through a hurricane or wildfire. As PR-ERF and DDAR have shown us, equitable distribution of resources will see more and more of us with and without disabilities making it through climate events. When the leadership of the most impacted becomes a core tenant of emergency management, our systems will be more resilient, our communities safer, and no one will be left behind. The disability community has spoken: "We refuse to lose one more life."²⁴

Notes

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