

Reed Award Winner Onix Maldonado Offers Insight into Complex Lobbying World

The intense and complex world of political lobbying in Washington, D.C., resembles a chess game, where each move means the difference between achieving the desired goal or being left out, in this case, of the political game. This is how Onix Maldonado described his work as a political consultant and lobbyist. The veteran legislative and public affairs adviser was named a Reed Award winner for Best Public Affairs Campaign.

Maldonado and his firm, World Professionals Group (WP Group), were nominated for the “Coalition for Food Security of Puerto Rico” campaign. It advocated for a congressional appropriation of \$600 million for the island’s Nutritional Assistance Program (PAN by its Spanish acronym). The funds made possible a higher monthly grant for 1.4 million PAN participants and that 260,000 additional families could participate in the program in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria.

Maldonado stressed that getting Congress’ attention was a monumental task at a time when President Donald Trump seemed to have no intention of approving the significant fund allocation.

“The success of this campaign was due to the fact that we know Washington well and we were able to identify which pieces to move on the chessboard in order to be successful,” Maldonado explained in an interview with Caribbean Business after the awards ceremony.

“We constantly see different organizations from Puerto Rico lobbying in Washington, but when they go there they only meet with members of Congress of Puerto Rican descent, and they don’t necessarily have jurisdiction over many of the issues concerned,” he added.

Maldonado described the back-and-forth of his public affairs campaign for the appropriation of PAN funds, as a meeting between David and Goliath, especially with an administration in which the White House was little receptive to Puerto Rico affairs.

However, he explained that key to the success of the mission was aligning “the private and public sectors on the same message without inflaming the typical partisan passions that could have killed the appropriation. With the private sector, we achieved a strong coalition with suppliers, farmers, nonprofits and political organizations” stateside.

“This project came at the request of the food industry because at that time this issue was not a priority for the government,” the lobbyist pointed out, adding that his firm was given the task of designing two different messages, “one aimed at Republicans, from the point of view of the negative economic impact on trade on the island and that it would eventually impact meat producers in several states, and for Democrats, [underscoring] a more social and discriminatory point of view against Puerto Rico.”

“

The first thing to understand is that you should know the power that you have...and see how that power can be aligned to reach key people who have jurisdiction over the matter being addressed.”



— Onix Maldonado,
Political Consultant

Specifically, Maldonado said, one of the most effective strategies they developed was the inclusion of the stateside meat production players, which sell tons of their products on the island annually, and whose production would be affected by the president's refusal to approve the funds, especially when Puerto Rico is among the six most important consumers of American beef in the world.

Key people

Maldonado criticized the "neglect" and the lack of strategy for years by the different government administrations on the island in dealing with the Washington issue, which he characterized as being crucial to navigate the stormy sea of partisan politics on the Hill.

The expert on political issues, who is an alumnus of the Graduate School of Political Management at the George Washington University in Washington, D.C., assured it is not about having access to Congress, but about creating effective strategies to achieve the desired goal.

"To move things in Congress you have to know how to reach the key people, the decision-makers, with the right message. We [at WP Group] do not sell access because access can be obtained by anyone. We sell strategies on how to handle government affairs effectively," he said.

Maldonado acknowledged, however, that the back-and-forth with Congress and the White House is far from over in terms of federal aid, especially those linked to Community Development Block Grant Disaster-Relief (CDBG-DR) program funds, which have not yet been disbursed to the Puerto Rico Housing Department, which is supposed to manage that money.

The political adviser suggests the current government take a different approach to the efforts it is carrying out in Washington, D.C.

"The government should, more than lobby as a government, seek alliances with the private sector of Puerto Rico, but it is not only to say they met and went to Washington to see the same members of Congress as always, as I mentioned. The first thing to understand is that you should know the power that you have, as we did in this case with the food industry and producers in the United States, and see how that power can be aligned to reach key people who have jurisdiction over the matter being addressed."

A tangle of bureaucracy

Amid the particularly strict impositions established by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) for the disbursement of CDBG-DR funds, which amount to about \$8.29 billion for the disaster caused by Hurricane Maria, Maldonado was confident that, by developing the correct strategy, the president's refusal to release the bureaucratic knot he imposed on the island can be reversed, pinning his decision on the corruption scandals that the administration of former Gov. Ricardo Rosselló and his successor, Gov. Wanda Vázquez, continues to generate.

"Managing the Trump administration is not easy, but we cannot be blinded by the typical partisan passions. The success we had in the CSAPR campaign was that we managed to develop a single unified message from the public and private sector

without inflaming the typical partisan passions that would have killed the allocation of funds. In that sense, it is to align messages that are key for both sides," he said.

"There are partisan passions in Washington that, if you don't know them well, run the risk of losing importance and relevance along the way," he added, while insisting on the importance, not only of the message being communicated but of who communicates it. "If we know what Trump is like, we can't send him [Democratic Rep.] Alexandria Ocasio Cortés," Maldonado joked.

The strong social media and lobbying campaign by the Puerto Rico Food Security Coalition focused on federal officials and urged Congress and the White House to extend the nutritional assistance program two years after the devastation of the 2017 hurricane season. It was published in media such as the New York Times and Politico.

The coalition requested a \$600 million allocation to Congress that was not seen favorably by Trump, who has sent threatening tweets against Puerto Rican officials accusing them of incompetence and corruption, and who seems hesitant to provide more recovery funds for the island.

Trump said at the time that he would not approve more funds and issued a veto threat. However, the campaign was able to convince Congress and forced the president to approve the funding. On June 6, Trump signed the \$600 million nutritional assistance bill, which benefited more than 260,000 people in Puerto Rico.

***Correction:** The Feb. 27-March 4, 2020, print version of this report incorrectly referred to the campaign as a Reed Award finalist. WP Group was conferred the award for Best Public Affairs Campaign during the Reed Awards ceremony in Atlanta on Feb. 20*