

POLICYMAKERS UPDATED ON THE STATUS OF HOUSING IN THE TERRITORY

Date : February 26, 2019



ST. THOMAS- Members of the Committee on Housing, Transportation, Infrastructure and Telecommunications chaired by Sen. Marvin Blyden, convened in a meeting at the Capitol Building on Tuesday, to receive testimony on the status of Housing in the Territory.

The Virgin Islands Housing Authority (VIHA) public housing operations are as follows: For FY 2018 VIHA received a total of \$46,525,937 of Federal Funds. The breakdown is as follows: Public Housing Subsidy is \$20,952,312, Public Housing Capital Fund is \$9,553,554, Housing Choice Voucher Administration Fee is \$1,865,490 and the Housing Voucher Choice Fund is \$14,154,581. Sen. Alicia Barnes inquired about the impact to service Section 8 clients despite rent inflation. VIHA Director of the Housing Choice Voucher Program Akala Anthony stated that the allocation of over \$14 million equivalents to 17,000 vouchers for 1,750 families with the inflation of rent. The inflation prices adversely affect the ability to house more families of which there are 2400 applicants on a waiting list.

In response to Sen. Blyden's inquiries on the number of active tenant councils per community and the hinderances of resident participation in leadership council positions; VIHA Executive Director Robert Graham noted that out of 26 housing communities there are three active Resident Councils with elected officers. The community centers are utilized for afterschool programs and daycare for the Dept. of Human Services. The lack of tenant council leaders is due to the responsibility of an advocate to take a stance against guns, gangs, and drugs in the neighborhood. Many are hesitant and fear retaliation because of those challenges.

Post Hurricanes Irma and Maria, the Lucinda Millin Homes elevator was damaged. However, some of the woes facing the Lucinda Millin Homes are the units were small, there was a lack of amenities and healthcare facilities, and the structure of the edifice was built with inexpensive materials. Sen. Athneil Thomas inquired about the relocation plans for the Lucinda Millin Homes and the Tutu Hi-Rise. Graham stated that VIHA's Portfolio Repositioning Strategy is to replace the edifice with new senior housing at Oswald Harris Court. As it relates to the Tutu Hi-Rise, demolition plans are on hold due to VIHA awaiting final approval from FEMA for the Project Worksheet 390. The VIHA's Portfolio Repositioning Strategy is to replace the Tutu Hi-Rise and relocate family and senior units to three locations.

Separately, the Catholic Charities of the Virgin Islands Inc. (CCVI) and the Virgin Islands Housing Finance Authority (VIHFA) shared an update.

Presently, CCVI St. Thomas location, is the only emergency shelter throughout the Territory. The shelter on St. Croix is inoperable because of damages sustained by Hurricane Maria in 2017. CCVI Executive Director Andrea Shillingford noted that one of the significant challenges is inadequate mental health and substance abuse treatment services which is a contributing factor to homelessness. Shortly, plans are inclusive of replacing and upgrading the Bethlehem House on St. Thomas and to open eleven apartment units on St. Croix to house single men.

The VIHFA was awarded \$242,684,000 with an additional \$779,217,000 totaling \$1,021,901,000 from the U.S. Virgin Islands Community Development Block Grant Disaster Recovery Action Plan. Since then, the department hired twenty employees to implement plans to increase housing and community development with the primary goal of creating opportunities for affordable homeownership throughout the Territory. Some of the targeted locations for first-time home-owners in the St. Croix District are Bonne Esperance, Cotton Valley, Estate Mount Pleasant, and Estate Solitude. In the St. Thomas-St. John District there will be homeownership opportunities at Whispering Hills, Estate Nazareth, Estate Fortuna, Ross Taarneberg, Queen Louise Apartments, and Estate Bethany.

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