

COMMITTEE RECEIVES TESTIMONY ON HOMELESSNESS AND CONDITION OF HOUSING COMMUNITIES IN TERRITORY

Date : April 5, 2017

ST. THOMAS- Members of the Committee on Housing, Public Works, Waste Management & Planning, chaired by Sen. Marvin Blyden met on Wednesday at the Earle B. Ottley Legislative Hall to receive status updates and discuss challenges within our territory.

Louise Peterson, Executive Director of the Methodist Training and Outreach Center and President of the V.I. Continuum of Care began her testimony describing homelessness in our territory as a “revolving door crisis”. This crisis can be directly attributed to a variety of underlying, unmet needs — physical, economical, and social.

The Continuum of Care program was designed to promote community-wide goals to end homelessness; provide funding to quickly rehouse homeless individuals (including unaccompanied youths) and families while minimizing trauma and dislocation to those persons; promote access to, and effective utilization of mainstream programs; and optimize self-sufficiency among individuals and families experiencing homelessness. The program is composed of transitional housing, permanent housing, supportive services, and the Homeless Management Information Services (HMIS).

On Friday, January 27, 2017, the COC conducted the required count of the sheltered and unsheltered homeless in our territory. The unsheltered homeless reflected an unduplicated total of three hundred seven (307), individuals, and the sheltered homeless shows sixty-six (66) individuals. The 2017 demographics of the homeless population has remained relatively consistent with previous counted years; with 90% Blacks/African Americans making up majority of the homeless count, 76% with Non-Hispanic, and 96% comprising of males. “The population that is increasing in homelessness are ages 0-17. They are categorized under youths without parents or unaccompanied minors. On St. Thomas, there are 39 individuals, 15 on St. John and 7 on St. Croix,” said Petersen.

Andrea Shillingford, Executive Director of Catholic Charities of the Virgin Islands, noted that provides services to the homeless and poor in the territory through its shelters, soup kitchens and street outreach programs, which serve approximately 800 persons annually. Bethlehem House Shelters for the Homeless provide safe, drug free environments and two daily meals to temporarily homeless individuals. The agency’s soup kitchens and outreach programs provide meals and clothing to members of the community in need. A free medical clinic, staffed by volunteer doctors, provides medical and dental screening and treatment to the homeless population on the second Saturday of every month.

The clinic is held at the St. Thomas shelter. Homeless individuals and families that reach out to Catholic Charities for assistance often have endured severe hardships such as eviction from housing by relatives or friends, job loss, family disputes, illness, physical, sexual and emotional trauma, and hunger. Most of these hardships may be attributed to a limited education. People who come to Catholic Charities start out with an emergency period of thirty (30) days, where once they are initially stabilized, they can begin to address many of the underlying problems that may have led to their homelessness. Exec. Director Shillingford added, "We continue to have discussions with the Virgin Islands Housing Authority to determine the availability of appropriate housing units for those participating in the Home at Last program."

Robert Graham, CPM and Executive Director of the Virgin Islands Housing Authority, stated that the VIHA is enthusiastic to partner with all stakeholders who desire to work together to improve the living conditions of Virgin Islanders. The VIHA Transition Agreement Action Plan, was designed by HUD to ensure the sustainability of the authority and address any unresolved performance and compliance deficiencies. "Since several tasks required more time to complete than the original document allowed, HUD extended the timeline to complete unresolved tasks.

Although VIHA expects to significantly complete the tasks during the extension period, the enhanced monitoring by HUD will continue through the HUD report card called Public Housing Assessment System (PHAS). Currently, VIHA has a score of (77) on HUD's PHAS report card," said Graham.

The Housing Choice Voucher Program, formerly known as Section 8, will experience a \$300 million reduction according to recent reports on the federal budget. Coupled with rent increases, this could result in the loss of thousands of vouchers and threaten currently housed families with homelessness.

VIHA receives approximately \$14 million annually that provides housing assistance to approximately 1,600 families and seniors. If the average annual subsidy is \$9,000 per household, we could lose 111 families for every \$1 million in subsidy cuts to the voucher program. Currently, over 838 landlords participate in the program. The public housing operating fund covers day-to-day operational and maintenance expenses not covered by resident rents.

The reported cut to HUD's operating fund of \$600 million is a 13% percent reduction from last year's funding, and approximately 72% of what is needed. However, for VIHA the operating budget is \$25 million in two components; \$21 million is federal funding and \$4 million is from tenant rent. Thus, a 13% reduction in HUD operating funding would reduce VIHA's operating budget by \$2.7 million.

According to their physical needs assessment, over \$333 million is needed to effectively operate and maintain the old public housing inventory. Through the Capital fund program, the Authority has \$11.4 million available, with \$6.7 million expended for capital projects and operations. Sen. Alicia

“Chucky” Hansen urged the VIHA to resume their once vigorous approach to clean up the communities overrun with criminal activity and efforts to make the residents safer. “The residents of William’s Delight are living in fear. Students have to walk through vacant places like Chabert, totally unprotected, just to get their education.”

Daryl Griffith, Acting Executive Director of the Virgin Islands Housing Finance Authority, presented status updates on the Emergency Housing, Low Income Housing Tax Credit and Affordable Housing Programs in the territory. Acting Director Griffith noted that there is a serious need for more emergency and affordable housing within the territory, in addition to listing the current capital projects underway. The meeting concluded with a brief summarization of the VIHFA’s 2nd Amendment to its 3-Year plan.

The measure will be presented at a later time.

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