

## LAWMAKERS UPDATED ON THE PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEM

**Date :** January 17, 2018

St. Thomas - The Committee on Education, Youth, Recreation chaired by Sen. Jean Forde, held a meeting on Wednesday, at the Capitol Building to receive testimony on the status of the Virgin Islands Department of Education (VIDOE) and the Department of Sports, Parks and Recreation.

“There are a lot of concerns in the aftermath of Hurricane Irma and Hurricane Maria. There was tremendous structural damage sustained to some of the schools. Currently, there are split sessions, some teachers have resigned, and some students relocated to the mainland. Therefore, today we will learn about the status of Public Education System,” said Sen. Forde.

“The most significant challenge the Department is facing across the Territory is the scarcity of materials and A&E Contractors,” said Sharon McCollum, Commissioner of VIDOE. “Roof damage continues to allow moisture into schools facilitating the exacerbated growth of mold.”

Post-hurricanes 2.9 million square feet of the public instructional education system has suffered irreparable damage. Federal agencies such as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers conducted assessments of all schools, and the Federal Environmental Protection Agency (FEMA) is in the process of site evaluations. Thus far, the cost to repair damaged schools is approximately \$1.2 billion. However, the final value is still undetermined.

“Did the department salvage valuables from the damaged schools?” inquired Sen. Forde. Commissioner McCollum stated that some materials were retrieved. However, other materials remained because of the possibility of cross-contamination. Insular Superintendent of VIDOE Dione Wells-Hendrington added, “The department is still in the process of removing equipment from shuttered schools. Materials are relocated to the auditorium for distribution to functioning schools.”

In the absence of some permanent school structures, the Department will use temporary facilities such as modular structures and sprung structures. The modular structures, scheduled to be installed in six months, will house temporary classrooms. The purpose of the sprung structures is to house support facilities such as administrative offices, curriculum centers, gymnasiums, auditoriums, kitchens, and cafeterias.

Sen. Janelle Sarauw requested clarification of the negotiation process between the VIDOE and FEMA as it pertains to the modular structures. In response, Territorial Director for Capital Projects and Facilities James Bernier said, “This process is ongoing. The Department is continuously submitting documents to FEMA upon request.” Commissioner McCollum added that this is a slow

process because FEMA changes the staff every six weeks; this results in the Department continually briefing FEMA of the status.

“Can you expound on the 100% reimbursement of Public Assistance with FEMA?” asked Sen. Tregenza Roach. Chief of Staff of VIDOE Anthony Thomas stated that the monies for the modular structures would be fully reimbursed once installed within the next six months. If that period passes, the Government of the Virgin Islands is financially responsible for a percentage of the cost of the modular structures.

Separately, VIDOE experienced a sharp decline in student enrollment. There is a total of 10,868 students attending school. However, officials are optimistic that student enrollment will increase for the 2018-2019 school year. Similarly, personnel has also decreased. There have been 60 resignations since the occurrence of the two storms which caused the Department to rely heavily on the substitute pool.

In addition to VIDOE, the Department of Sports, Parks and Recreation (DSPR) also shared an update. Assistant Commissioner of DSPR Calvert White stated that an estimated \$20 million needed for repairs and damages caused by the hurricanes. Currently, DSPR lacks the upfront cash necessary to fund projects. There is also a low availability of programs for children due to structural damages and safety issues. Therefore, DSPR is coordinating with non-profit organizations to provide activities for the children.

Senators present are Jean Forde, Brian Smith, Tregenza Roach, Marvin Blyden, Novelle Francis, Marvin Blyden, Kurt Vialet, Neville James, Myron Jackson, Dwayne DeGraff and Janelle Sarauw.

**###**