TESTIMONY

Committee on Disaster Recovery and Infrastructure
Legislature of the Virgin Islands
Block 1: Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency

PRESENTED BY: ADRIENNE L. WILLIAMS-OCTALIEN
DIRECTOR

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Good Morning Senator Janelle K. Sarauw, Chairwoman of the 34th Legislature’s Committee on Disaster Recovery and Infrastructure, other members of the Committee, fellow testifiers, and the listening and viewing audience. I am Adrienne L. Williams-Octalien, Director of the Virgin Islands Office of Disaster Recovery. I am joined by the Deputy Director of Finance and Compliance for ODR, Mrs. Artra Watlington-Francis, as well as the Territorial Public Assistance Officer, Mrs. Malinda Vigilant-Messer and the Territorial Hazard Mitigation Officer Graciela Rivera. Thank you for the opportunity to provide updates on the recovery efforts of the Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency alongside Director Daryl Jaschen.

The Office of Disaster Recovery has been providing centralized oversight of federal disaster recovery funds across all governmental departments, semiautonomous agencies, and private non-profit entities since its inception in February of 2019. The office has identified over 1,500 projects across the Territory that ODR is assisting with a range of activities from securing funding, addressing permitting hurdles, completing compliant procurements, executing contracts, submitting payments and project management.

The aforementioned tasks can be categorized within three primary areas of ODR’s responsibilities: Get Money, Spend Money and Spend It Correctly.

As of February 28th, $3.9B of recovery funds have been obligated to projects within the Territory representing 49% of the anticipated $8B in obligations across various disaster recovery funded programs. $1.76B or 45% of these obligated funds have been expended to date.
In addition to being the Director of the ODR, I also serve as the Governor’s Authorized Representative (GAR) to provide oversight and direction over FEMA’s federal disaster recovery funds and execute all necessary documents on behalf of the Territory.

In June of 2019, Governor Albert Bryan Jr. and Lieutenant Governor Tregenza A. Roach signed Executive Order 487-2019 reassigning the operations of the Territorial Public Assistance (PA) Unit and the Territorial Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) Unit from the auspices of the Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency (VITEMA) to the Office of Disaster Recovery (ODR) for operational purposes. These reassignments are in accordance with recommendations set forth by FEMA’s National Disaster Recovery Framework (NDRF), outlining both short and long-term recovery actions in the event of a disaster. In September of 2011, the NDRF was developed after federal legislation mandated the creation of a national-level disaster recovery strategy due to the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. To supplement recovery efforts, the NDRF acknowledges that where additional needs exist, jurisdictions can reassign existing internal resources to streamline and expedite recovery through the addition of new or ad hoc state recovery agencies.

As a result, ODR provides executive oversight of both programs in coordination with the various federal agencies who funded grants awarded throughout the Territory, while VITEMA continues as the recipient of all Public Assistance and Hazard Mitigation Grant Program funds. Reassignment under the auspices of the ODR has made available to the Territory a “one-stop” hub for recipients, sub-recipients and the community to route all matters related to disaster recovery. There is a clear delineation of VITEMA’s and ODR’s roles. VITEMA’s responsibilities are focused on preparedness and response and ODR focuses on recovery. VITEMA’s Director, Daryl
Jaschen, and I work closely together and collaborate when necessary to address any challenges and concerns impacting the recovery.

This partnership allows for VITEMA to increase its effectiveness in core functions vital to the Territory’s emergency response and execute program functions key to preparedness and readiness. ODR provides support to VITEMA to ensure that all recovery requirements are in place to facilitate a smooth transition from the response to the recovery phase.

In addition to being the recipient of PA and the HMGP funds, VITEMA also manages key recovery projects impacting the Territory. Amongst Governor Bryan’s Top 100 Recovery Projects are the Territory-wide Tsunami Warning System and the St. Croix VITEMA Hermon Hill Wind Retrofit & External Safe Room. As one of the most critical recovery projects for VITEMA, the $1.6M Tsunami Warning System Alternative “428” Project is slated to repair forty-four tsunami warning stations across the Territory: nineteen on St. Thomas, seven on St. John, one on Water Island, and seventeen on St. Croix. VITEMA and their vendor, American Signal, will begin installation on St. Thomas, St. John and Water Island by the end of March 2021. They will then move on to St. Croix. Based on the current schedule, the Territory’s Tsunami Warning System should be fully functional by July 2021.

FEMA’s Hazard Mitigation Grant Program obligated $22.5M in 2019 for the VITEMA St. Croix Hermon Hill Wind Retrofit & External Safe Room project. Original plans for the facility included the Emergency Operations Center (EOC), 911 Emergency Communication Center (ECC), and the Bureau of Information Technology (BIT) to facilitate increased efficiency of emergency response throughout the Territory. However, during the Design Phase, it was identified that in order
accommodate such a merger, the footprint of the facility would need to be expanded. As such, the HMGP team has requested FEMA to approve the expansion. To date, VITEMA continues to coordinate with FEMA to re-submit the amended application that will remove BIT and address size requirements. VITEMA and HMGP anticipate resubmission to FEMA by April 2021.

As of February 2021, 23 PWs totaling $177.8M in Public Assistance projects have been obligated. Of this amount, $115.9M are administrative cost projects and $60.1M are for Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC) projects. To date, $77.1M of those funds has been expended.

Currently, the St. Thomas EOC is being costed through FEMA’s Consolidated Resource Center (CRC) for the required repairs to the three-story building. As an Alternative “428” project, ODR anticipates receipt of the Fix Cost Offer (FCO) for VITEMA’s acceptance ahead of the December 31st deadline.

The St. John EOC is housed within the Department of Public Works (DPW) building and is currently going through the FEMA process for obligation. FEMA’s Environmental Planning & Historic Preservation (EHP) is scheduled to complete a site visit on Tuesday, March 9th and since the building is more than forty-five years of age, a State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) consultation will also be required. Like the St. Thomas EOC, the St. John DPW Building that houses the VITEMA St. John EOC, is an Alternative “428” Project. The ODR anticipates receiving the FCO from FEMA before May 2021.

Hazard Mitigation reduces the loss of life and property by minimizing the impact of disasters via a variety of mitigation activities. The Hazard Mitigation Plan identifies natural disaster risks and
vulnerabilities that can impact the designated area. Post the identification of these risks, long-term strategies are determined to protect people and property from the identified hazards. This plan is key to breaking the continuous cycle of damage and reconstruction.

In 2018, FEMA HMGP obligated $4.9M for the development of the Hazard Mitigation and Resilience Plan. This plan will replace the 2019 Hazard Mitigation Plan and is a coordinated initiative with the University of the Virgin Islands to provide a multi-sector planning effort that integrates elements of resilience, sustainability and climate adaptation that will support the development of improved mitigation strategies with the goal of increasing resiliency in the US Virgin Islands.

Madam Chair, thank you for the opportunity to provide an update on the status of VITEMA’s recovery projects and the assistance ODR provides to that end. ODR remains steadfast in its commitment to its partnership with VITEMA in managing current and future disasters as we continue to build a legacy of resilience. This concludes my testimony. My team and I remain available for any questions you may have.