TESTIMONY

Committee on Disaster Recovery and Infrastructure
Legislature of the Virgin Islands
Block 1: Virgin Islands Department of Education

OFFICE OF DISASTER RECOVERY
PRESENTED BY: DIRECTOR ADRIENNE L. WILLIAMS- OCTALIEN
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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 today by Deputy Director of Finance and Compliance, Mrs. Artra Watlington-Francis. Thank you for the opportunity to provide updates on the Department of Education’s recovery projects and initiatives.

Since its inception in February of 2019, the Office of Disaster Recovery continues to fulfill its mission to provide federal disaster recovery fund management through the coordination of efforts across all governmental departments, semi-autonomous agencies, and private nonprofit entities. ODR aids in securing funds, project management, procurement compliance, contract execution, payment processing, and overcoming permitting and other hurdles. These functions represent ODR’s key responsibilities with a focus on getting the funds, spending the funds, and spending them correctly.

Education is the cornerstone of individual achievement and a major pillar in building communities that thrive and sustain success through challenging times. The reconstruction and repair of the Territory’s educational facilities is a top recovery priority for Governor Bryan. These recovery projects lay the essential groundwork needed to build resilient facilities designed to meet current building codes and industry standards.

In 2018, Congress passed legislation that had a profound effect on the recovery opportunities from damages caused by Hurricanes Irma and Maria for both the US Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico.
The Bipartisan Budget Act (BBA) of 2018 made sweeping changes to the Stafford Act for the Caribbean. Through the BBA, FEMA can replace or restore the function of a facility or system to industry standards without regard to its pre-disaster condition. In late 2019, the Territory took advantage of opportunities made available by this legislation and utilizing North Carolina’s standards as a guideline, developed standards for the rebuild of the Territory’s schools for approval by FEMA. These Industry Standards were approved by FEMA in February 2020. With this approval, the Virgin Islands can rebuild its educational facilities in line with national norms and provide the Territory’s youth with the necessary resources to thrive in a global market.

Throughout the recovery process of our schools, there has been many challenges that resulted in delays in the repair and construction of our schools. As of March 2021, there are 43 sites under FEMA BBA review for replacement or repair.

The BBA provided a tremendous opportunity for the Territory, but it came at a cost. That cost was time. It took over a year for FEMA to issue the guidelines for implementing the BBA because it significantly changed the way that the Public Assistance Program was administered. Frankly, FEMA had to create the rules to accompany the new legislation. These rules were not finalized by FEMA until early 2020.

Also attributing to the delay of our educational facilities were outstanding Damage, Description and Dimensions or (DDDs), which is a preliminary step in formulating a FEMA Public Assistance project that requires concurrence by both FEMA and the Territory on all the storm-related damages associated with a project. To address these delays, former FEMA Administrator Peter
Gaynor met with Governor Bryan in December 2019 to discuss these issues and pledged to finish school inspections by January 2020 so that project development can begin.

In July of 2020, the Territory with support from Witt O’ Briens, submitted to FEMA their BBA Repair/Replacement analysis and priority order listing for 43 Virgin Islands Department of Education (VIDE) school projects. Of the projects submitted to FEMA for consideration, 19 of the 43 projects were for full or prudent replacement, with the highest priority schools being Arthur A. Richards School, Charlotte Amalie High School, Julius E. Sprauve School, St. Croix Central High School, and the Addelita Cancryn Junior High School. The remaining 24 projects were submitted for modernization/repair only.

The Arthur A. Richards School was the first official approval for replacement received by the Territory in April 2020. A collaborative process to apply the FEMA-approved BBA Education industry standards to the scope of work and cost estimate for the Arthur Richards campus is currently in progress. The current location is being demolished and will be relocated to the Evelyn Williams site. It is anticipated that the construction of the new Arthur Richards will start in March 2022 and will be completed by June 2024. The approval of Arthur Richards’ Scope of work and Project development will provide the blueprint for future school projects, facilitating a smooth transition into the Territory’s next set of school approvals.

The Julius E. Sprauve School on St. John was initially requested as a replacement at its current location under the 50% Rule. However, in accordance with the Facilities Master Plan, VIDE plans to construct a campus for the Julius E. Sprauve School at a property owned by the National Park Services as identified in the preliminary US Department of Interior Land Swap Agreement. A full
campus replacement decision by FEMA is necessary for the forward movement of the land swap agreement. In the interim, FEMA’s Environmental Historic Preservation team is reviewing the project in coordination with the National Park Services for compliance with NEPA requirements. To date, two of the seven buildings identified for prudent replacement have been approved, with the remaining five under FEMA review.

The Territory also submitted modified 50% rule calculations for Charlotte Amalie High School’s replacement, which is currently under FEMA review. The FEMA Environmental Historic Preservation team granted approval to move forward with the demolition of three buildings that were deemed unsafe for occupancy. The CAHS demolition was awarded to Grade All Heavy Equipment.

The St. Croix Central High School was also submitted for replacement consideration. Modified 50% calculations for 21 of 22 buildings are in FEMA cost development with the exception of the gymnasium, which has been deemed eligible for Prudent Replacement.

Addelita Cancryn is also being reviewed by FEMA for prudent replacement. In accordance with the VIDE Facilities Master Plan, the school is slated for relocation.

In addition to schools, the Territory has highlighted the St. Thomas Curriculum Center as a key priority project. The current location sits on a Superfund site within a 100-year flood zone, and consequently, VIDE has asked FEMA to review the project for relocation and replacement. An official response letter from DPNR denying future permitting to rebuild on-site was submitted to FEMA earlier this month to provide additional justification for the relocation of this project and is under FEMA consideration.
Overall, VIDE has a total of 79 FEMA Public Assistance projects. Thirty-three projects have been obligated, totaling $128.8M for management costs and temporary and permanent repairs related to Hurricanes Irma and Maria. ODR has assisted VIDE in drawing down and fully expending $118.9M of the obligated amount, $183K are management costs and $118.6M are project costs.

As we await FEMA’s determinations of the Territory’s schools, VIDE is moving forward with commencing much-needed repair work to several educational facilities. The Gramboko Building has been selected to be repurposed as the temporary site for the Curriculum Center. The building repair project was obligated for $1M by the FEMA Public Assistance Program in December 2020. ODR is working closely with VIDE to coordinate Territory contracted A&E design services to develop the scope of work and design.

Construction is also underway at the Ralph O. Wheatley Skills Center. The Design-Build contract was awarded to Custom Builders and work commenced in December 2020. The repair project is 60% complete and on track for completion by May 2021.

The ODR has also assisted VIDE in securing funding outside of FEMA’s Public Assistance Program for immediate repairs at the Gladys Abraham Campus and to complete the demolition project at the Charlotte Amalie High School, which is still pending obligation. A construction contract for Gladys Abraham was executed with Custom Builders in March 2021, and the repair project should be completed by December 2021.
VIDE Public Assistance recovery projects are expected to surpass $1B and ODR is working with VIDE to build the needed capacity to manage these projects as they are obligated. Additionally, ODR continues to support VIDE through the elevation of critical project issues to FEMA leadership as well as facilitate the movement of projects from obligation to completion.

Recovery is not a sprint. One year after the prudent replacement decision for the Arthur Richards Junior High School, the Territory is finally rounding the turn towards receiving the final cost that will lead to the project’s obligation. This accomplishment will ensure that subsequent schools move through the FEMA process faster. The opportunity to replace schools through the BBA allows the Territory to transform public education by providing more resilient structures and solidifying the department’s ability to return to normal operations quickly after a disaster.

While the process has been complicated, ODR, VIDE and FEMA’s collaborative approach is working to secure the necessary funding to execute the Facilities Master Plan. ODR values the commitment and passion that the VIDE Operations Team brings to their projects and will continue to support all phases of project development and construction.

Madam Chair, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. This concludes ODR’s update on the status of VIDE’s recovery projects and our efforts to assist the department in restructuring new schools in the Territory. We look forward to VIDE’s continued partnership in the mission to “Build a Legacy of Resilience”. My team and I are available to answer any questions you may have.