



**THE
DEPARTMENT
OF HUMAN
SERVICES**

**Committee
of the Whole**
Wednesday, 29 October 2025
SENATE PRESIDENT
MILTON POTTER, CHAIRMAN

Virgin Islands Department of Human Services
36th Legislature of the U.S. Virgin Islands, Committee of the Whole
October 29, 2025 3:00pm

I. Introduction

Good Afternoon Senate President Milton Potter, Honorable Senators of the 36th Legislature and its staff, members of the Governor's Financial Team, the listening and viewing audience, and people of the Virgin Islands.

My name is **Averil E. George**, and I serve as the **Commissioner** of the U.S. Virgin Islands Department of Human Services. I am joined today by **Ms. Natalie Bailey, Administrator** of the Division of Family Assistance, and by Ms. **Nestra C. Lawrence, Assistant Administrator** of the Division of Family Assistance, whose team oversees the administration of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (**SNAP**) throughout the territory. We thank you for convening this important discussion on the impact of SNAP during the ongoing federal government shutdown.

This crisis began to unfold on **October 10, 2025**, when the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) issued formal guidance instructing all states and territories to **hold their November SNAP issuance files** due to insufficient federal funds. That directive was our first official confirmation that Virgin Islands families could face a disruption in their monthly nutrition benefits. It prompted immediate internal coordination and public outreach to warn our clients and prepare for contingency action.

SNAP is more than a program—it is a lifeline for thousands of Virgin Islands families. It ensures that children wake up to breakfast before school, that seniors can put groceries on their tables without choosing between food and medicine, and that hardworking parents can stretch every dollar to provide their families with nutritious meals. While some critics may unfairly characterize recipients as lazy or undeserving, the reality is that the vast majority are actually hardworking individuals facing economic challenges beyond their control. Senators, the federal shutdown threatens this stability.

These are not abstract numbers or statistics; they are real people facing real hardship. When federal payments halt, it is the empty lunchbox of a child, the bare refrigerator in a senior's home, or a parent forced to make impossible trade-offs between paying for food or other essentials. Every delayed benefit ripples through homes and neighborhoods, touching the lives of our most vulnerable citizens.

While Governor Bryan has advanced a local relief plan to bridge the gap in federal funding, it is important to underscore that **this intervention requires legislative approval** to proceed fully and lawfully. The Executive Branch has acted swiftly to protect our residents, but the authority to sustain or expand this relief ultimately rests with this body. Your deliberation and support are essential to ensuring that no Virgin Islander is left behind during this shutdown.

Please allow me the opportunity at this time, to thank the many **nonprofit organizations across the territory** that have stepped up to assist during this time of uncertainty. Your compassion and responsiveness are helping to fill critical gaps and ensure that no one is left hungry while we work through this crisis.

However, we must still respectfully advise the public that **VIDHS is not responsible for the operations, policies, or practices of non-VIDHS philanthropic efforts**. While we deeply appreciate their contributions, we urge community members to exercise a bit of caution when engaging with organizations that request personal or sensitive information in exchange for assistance. Protecting your privacy is paramount, and we encourage all residents to verify the legitimacy of any outreach or support services offered outside of official government channels.

II. Immediate Response to the Federal Shutdown

When the federal shutdown was announced, the Department of Human Services moved swiftly under the direction of Governor Albert Bryan Jr. to implement a local SNAP relief plan to bridge the gap in federal funding.

The Bryan/Roach Administration has approved the use of local funds to help SNAP families during the shutdown. Each household will receive a **paper check** that covers **half of the amount they normally get for the month of November**. This is not a full replacement of SNAP benefits, but it's a short-term measure to help families get through the month while federal funding is paused.

Why paper checks?

The check distribution method was chosen after discussions and consultation with Fidelity Information Systems (FIS), the federal contractor DHS utilizes to manage the EBT system. FIS advised DHS, the Department of Finance, and the Governor that reprogramming the entire system to issue partial benefits for recipients in the territory would take a **minimum** of one month. After careful consideration, all parties agreed that mailing checks was the fastest, most efficient, and compliant way to provide relief at scale.

DHS, working with support and assistance from the Department of Finance, (DOF) has already processed and validated the files for issuance. As of this week, **10,603** households across the Virgin Islands will receive checks totaling **\$2,767,797.50**.

The distribution breakdown is as follows:

- **St. Thomas: 4,780** households – **\$1,189,196.00**
- **St. John: 258** households – **\$66,598.00**
- **St. Croix** (Christiansted and Frederiksted): **5,537** households – **\$1,506,003.50**

Records have been sorted by ZIP code, and distribution to the Post Office is scheduled to ensure timely delivery. Checks returned to the Department of Finance by the postal service due to invalid addresses will be collected in coordination with DOF. DHS will make every effort to reach out to customers so they can retrieve their checks

DHS is also establishing **territory-wide hotline numbers** and a **dedicated email address**—usvisnaprelief@dhs.vi.gov—for clients who have not received their checks within seven days of mailing. Returned or undeliverable checks will be held securely at DHS district offices, and staff will reach out directly to clients to facilitate pickup.

Clients may contact **DHS or the Division of Family Assistance (DFA)** using the following hotline numbers:

- **St. Thomas/St. John Hotline:** (340) 772-7110
- **St. Croix Hotline:** (340) 715-6909

III. Overview of SNAP Participation in Fiscal Year 2025

To understand the scope of this intervention, it is helpful to review participation trends across the territory. During Fiscal Year 2025 (October 2024 – August 2025), DHS served an average of **10,500** households per month, representing approximately **20,700** individuals. The program issued an average of **\$5.5 million** in benefits monthly, totaling **\$60.5 million for the fiscal year to date**.

A. St. Thomas District

In St. Thomas, participation averaged **4,817 households** and **9,228 persons monthly**, with total FY2025 issuance reaching **\$26,058,119**. Utilization has remained stable, reflecting ongoing need among working families and seniors as food and import costs remain elevated.

B. St. John

On St. John, DHS supported an average of **224 households** and **420 individuals each month**, with total issuance of **\$1,200,305**. While the overall number of participants is smaller, the impact is significant due to higher living costs and limited retail access for food purchasing.

C. St. Croix – Christiansted and Frederiksted

On St. Croix, participation accounts for more than half of all SNAP households' territory wide. Christiansted remains the largest district receiving SNAP, reflecting both the size of its population and the ongoing economic challenges many residents face.

In Christiansted, DHS served an average of **4,841 households** and **9,481 persons monthly**, issuing **\$27,565,792**.

In Frederiksted, the Department supported an average of **790 households** and **1,944 individuals**, totaling **\$5,731,268**.

Together, SNAP benefits on St. Croix reached approximately **\$33.3 million** during **FY2025**, illustrating continued economic vulnerability and the importance of this support to household stability.

IV. Territorial Impact and Realities on the Ground

The data tells a story far larger than numbers. In practical terms, nearly one in five Virgin Islanders rely on SNAP assistance to meet their nutritional needs. Among seniors, approximately **3,400 to 4,100 individuals aged 65 and older**—roughly **one in four to one in six seniors**—depend on this support each month. The federal shutdown jeopardizes that stability, particularly for children, seniors, and persons with disabilities.

In Housing communities on St. Thomas, St. Croix, and St. John, SNAP is often the difference between hunger and stability. Retailers and small grocery stores across the territory also heavily rely on SNAP transactions to sustain business volume. When benefits are delayed, it affects not only households but also the local economy—from corner markets to food vendors.

The federal shutdown therefore has a cascading effect. Without the intervention of the Bryan/Roach Administration, more than **\$5.5 million** in monthly spending power would have evaporated from our local economy, intensifying hardship across all islands.

V. Continuing Coordination and Legislative Partnership

Throughout this process, DHS has worked closely with USDA-FNS and our federal partners to ensure that all relief actions remain fully compliant and auditable. Every transaction and correspondence is being meticulously documented for post-shutdown reconciliation, with the understanding that the federal government has indicated these funds will not be reimbursed to the local government.

As part of our ongoing coordination efforts, the Department of Human Services will continue to actively monitor the status of all SNAP relief activities, community distributions, and related assistance events across the territory. DHS will provide timely updates to the public using all available communication channels—including official press releases, social media announcements, and public service advisories—to ensure residents receive accurate and consistent information. Our goal is to maintain transparency, prevent misinformation, and reassure families that we are tracking developments in real time as the situation evolves.

We thank Senate President Potter for his immediate and proactive engagement on this issue, and for ensuring that the Legislature stands ready to act on any measure needed to sustain or expand local relief. Should the shutdown persist, the Department is prepared to present additional recommendations for legislative consideration.

VI. Conclusion

In closing, Mr. President and Members of the Legislature, this is not a crisis of numbers—it is a crisis of nourishment and dignity. The Department of Human Services, in close coordination with the Department of Finance, has prepared a **temporary plan** to prevent food insecurity among our most vulnerable residents. This relief is intended **only for the month of November**, and it is a stopgap measure. We do not know when the federal government will reopen, but with the Legislature's approval, we can act decisively to deliver this lifeline and protect our people.

We extend our deepest gratitude to **Governor Albert Bryan Jr.**, whose leadership throughout this crisis has been personal, hands-on, and unwavering. The Governor personally reached out to our EBT vendors, participated in planning meetings with administrators and staff, and worked closely with our team to shape a plan rooted in urgency, compassion, and accountability. He asked the right questions, sought the necessary answers, and remained in constant communication with the Division of Family Assistance. His commitment to the people of the Virgin Islands has been evident in every step of this process.

We respectfully ask the Honorable Members of the 36th Legislature to consider this measure with the urgency and empathy it demands. Your support is essential to ensuring that no Virgin Islander is left behind during this federal shutdown. The decisions made in this chamber will ripple through homes, families, and futures. We must not hesitate to do what is right, even when it is difficult.

Once this measure is passed by the Legislature, the DHS and DOF Teams, will move immediately to issue and mail the relief checks so that families can receive assistance as soon as possible. Every day matters in this effort, and we stand ready to act the moment this authorization is granted.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. My Team and I stand prepared to answer any questions you may have.