

35th LEGISLATURE OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

COMMITTEE ON CULTURE, YOUTH, AGING, SPORTS AND PARKS

CHAIRPERSON – HONORABLE SENATOR ANGEL L. BOLQUES JR.

Friday, August 30, 2024



VIRGIN ISLANDS DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES

“Testimony from the Department of Human Services on the operation of senior citizen and youth programs, including but not limited to challenges and successes.”

1 Good morning, Honorable Senator Angel L. Bolques, Jr. Chair of the Committee
2 on Culture, Youth, Aging, Sports, and Parks, committee members, other Senators
3 present, and the listening and viewing audience. On behalf of the Honorable
4 Commissioner Averil E. George, who is briefly out of the territory and unable to
5 attend today's hearing, we, Assistant Commissioners Carla Benjamin and Denelle
6 Baptiste embrace this opportunity to provide testimony on the operations of our
7 senior citizen and youth programs.

8 In acknowledgment and reinforcement of the Virgin Islands Department of
9 Human Services (VIDHS) statutory authority (3 V.I.C. §432) as the "state agency"
10 for all programs pertaining to youth, children, handicapped, elderly and low-
11 income adults and families whenever such designation is required by federal law
12 for the purpose of participating in federal programs and VIDHS' current daily
13 responsibility to administer services across the lifespan from birth to death, we will
14 provide updates in the order of programs from youth to the elderly.

15 **OPERATION OF YOUTH PROGRAMS**

16 The **Office of Child Care and Regulatory Services (OCCRS)** is a fully federally-
17 funded program that provides childcare subsidies primarily to low-income families
18 for early childhood education and care for children from infancy to 12 years old.
19 They provide the same assistance for after-school programs, summer programs

20 and nontraditional hours care to qualifying families. Through the federal Office of
 21 Child Care's (OCC) Child Care Development Fund (CCDF), subsidies can be
 22 rendered to caretakers that are working or in training for at least 30 hours per
 23 week and who meet the income and household size guidelines. To enhance the
 24 program's ability to assist families in the territory, there were 2 key changes made
 25 over the past 2 years. First, the OCCRS amended its state plan to keep a COVID
 26 allowance that makes all essential workers eligible for CCDF funding with a
 27 possible copayment not to exceed \$100 per child, monthly depending on the
 28 household income.

	<i>Providers</i>	<i>Formal</i>	<i>Informal</i>	<i>CCDF</i>	<i># of Children</i>	<i># of Families</i>	<i># of Essential Worker cases</i>
St. Croix	38	29	9	23	358	246	68
St. Thomas	59	59	0	23	211	167	45
St. John	9	9	0	2	5	3	5
Totals	106	97	9	48	574	416	118

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 30 Second, with federal funder encouragement and support, the program
 31 increased its CCDF subsidy to the 100th percentile of the cost of childcare, as
 32 determined by the territory's 2022 Market Rate Survey and Narrow Cost Analysis.

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CHILD CARE CATEGORY	PREVIOUS SUBSIDY	NEW SUBSIDY
INFANTS (Birth to 11 Months)	\$450	\$600
TODDLERS (1 Year to 2 Years)	\$450	\$675
PRESCHOOLERS (3 Years to 4 Years)	\$400	\$725
SPECIAL NEEDS (Up to age 19 Years)	\$475	\$475
SUMMER	\$400	Ages 3-4: \$725
		Ages 5-13: \$429
SCHOOL AGE (5 Years to 12 Years)	\$200	\$429

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37 In addition to CCDF subsidy payments, which is a function of the OCCRS' Subsidy
 38 component, the federal OCC also provides direct financial support to childcare
 39 providers in support of the Quality Improvement and Licensing components of the
 40 program. The program has provided millions of dollars of grant funds directly to
 41 the territory's childcare providers as well as providing "Wish List" items, where the
 42 program has purchased items such as furniture, equipment, furnishings, teaching
 43 devices and software, etc. The end of August is the deadline for applications for
 44 the territory's biggest grant opportunity to date, the American Rescue Plan Act
 45 Child Care Stabilization Grant, which allow child care providers that were licensed
 46 or certified by March 11, 2021 to apply for grants to cover the cost of operations,
 47 to include wages, insurance premiums, utilities, rent or mortgage, etc. The
 48 jurisdiction received an ARPA (American Rescue Plan Act) Child Care Stabilization
 49 grant of \$23,084,248 of which to date, the department has paid out more than

50 sixteen million (\$16M) in grant funds with another \$4.6M approved to be paid. The
51 end of the month will also represent the deadline for the ARPA Quality Mini Grants
52 for: Supplemental Energy Sources, (Maximum amount: \$40K), Outdoor Play
53 Equipment (Maximum amount: \$35K) Education & Training (Maximum amount:
54 \$30K) and Health & Safety (Maximum amount: \$3K). Providers may apply by
55 August 31, 2024. We hope to have other grant opportunities for childcare
56 providers as we move into fiscal year 2025 but urge childcare providers to take
57 advantage of these.

58 The **Office of Head Start (OHS)** serves children ages three to five from low-income
59 families providing these children with high-quality early childhood education and
60 care that promotes the school readiness by providing education, health, nutrition,
61 and disability services. Ten percent of Head Start enrollment is designated for
62 children with disabilities. The Head Start Program in the Virgin Islands is funded for
63 794 children.

64 The Head Start School Year 2024-2025 welcomes students on Tuesday, September
65 3, 2024. The program will begin the year operating 15 classrooms on St. Thomas
66 and 22 classrooms on St. Croix. The program looks forward to welcoming students
67 into the St. John district into their new state of the art facility with modern
68 playgrounds and other amenities in January 2025.



69 The program continues to make great progress on the disaster recovery major
 70 construction projects across the territory. All projects are estimated to be
 71 operational by January 2026.

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Facility	% Complete	Location	Type	Cost	Estimated Completion
Cruz Bay Head Start	90%	St. John	1 Classroom	\$ 8,013,892	1 st Qtr FY2025
Concordia Head Start	51%	St. Croix	1 Classroom	\$ 6,955,029	2 nd Qtr FY2025
Anna's Hope Administrative Bldg.	45%	St. Croix	Administrative	\$ 7,188,099	2 nd Qtr FY2025
Lindbergh Head Start	61%	St. Thomas	1 Classroom	\$ 3,068,840	2 nd Qtr FY2025
Minnetta Mitchell Storage & Admin Bldg.	63%	St. Thomas	Storage & Administrative	\$ 4,642,373	2 nd Qtr FY2025
Bolongo Head Start	47%	St. Thomas	4 Classrooms	\$11,285,859	4 th Qtr FY2025

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74 The programs that make up the child welfare services spectrum are the **Office of**
 75 **Intake and Emergency Services (Intake)**, the **Division of Children and Family**
 76 **Services (DCFS)**, the **Division of Intervention and Prevention Services (DIPS)** and
 77 some services are provided the **Office of Residential and Interstate Compact**
 78 **Affairs (ORICA)**.

79 These programs provide services for children and families at risk for child
 80 maltreatment and/or involvement in the juvenile justice system. Services are
 81 provided for children from birth to age 18 – age 19 (if a Juvenile court of
 82 jurisdiction so orders) or age 21 for children in extended foster care. Services to

83 assist with successful transition to adulthood are available for youth up to age 23
84 if they were in the GVI custody at age 14 or older.

85 **Intake** continues to provide first responder services for cases of child maltreatment
86 on a 24-hour basis. **DCFS** continues to provide in-home services to families with
87 elevated risk for child maltreatment to prevent escalation to harm and/or family
88 separation. **DCFS** also continues to provide foster care and adoption services, to
89 include foster and adoptive parent recruitment and retention. The **DIPS**
90 programming continues to provide prevention services for youth who have not
91 escalated to adjudication and remand, as well as intervention services to those
92 that have. The Youth Rehabilitation Center and the Anna's Hope Group Home
93 are residential institutions under this division. The **Office of Residential and**
94 **Interstate Compact Affairs** continues to manage and monitor residential facility
95 services to clients across the lifespan as well as to administer Interstate Compact
96 on the Placement of Children (ICPC) and Interstate Compact for Juveniles
97 (ICJ) services per statute. This year marked the territory's first contractual
98 relationship with a facility for services for youth via MAP Provider Agreement. This
99 allows payment for services to follow the 83/17 Medicaid match.

100 **UPDATES ON SENIOR PROGRAMS**

101 The Division of Senior Citizen Affairs (SCA) currently oversees twelve (12) programs
102 dedicated to supporting the elderly community in the US Virgin Islands (USVI).
103 These programs encompass a range of vital services, including:

- Socio-Recreation
- Homemaker Services Program
- Senior Community Services Employment Program
- Retired Senior Volunteer Program
- Family Caregiver Support Program
- Foster Grandparent Program
- State Pharmaceutical Assistance Program
- Adult Protective Services
- Information and Referrals
- Elderly Nutrition Program (Meals on Wheels)
- Homes for the Aged

104 **Socio-Recreation Program**

105 Our Socio-Rec Program operates three Senior Centers: Estate Richmond (St.
106 Croix), Project Strive (St. Thomas), and Adrian Center (St. John). The objective of
107 this program is to provide specialized recreational and experiential activities that
108 contribute to maintaining or improving the health, functional capacities, and
109 overall quality of life for our senior population. Activities such luncheons, beach
110 days, bingo, arts and crafts, and movie nights help to engage our seniors and
111 keep them active. Currently, there are 70 seniors in St. Croix, 46 in St. Thomas, and
112 24 in St. John. Expansion of these programs are limited by physical space and
113 funding for personnel and other operational costs. It is important to note that
114 active independence is a requirement for participation and maximum benefit

115 from the program and that adult day care is not currently a service provided
116 within our senior centers. Memory disorders are very prevalent among our aging
117 population with a gap in the availability of services currently within the
118 department and our community.

119 **Homemaker Services Program**

120 Our Homemaker staff assist 193 elderly, frail, homebound clients and adults with
121 disabilities by supporting their Activities of Daily Living (ADLs) and Instrumental
122 ADLs, as well as light housekeeping and other personal care needs. This support
123 helps reduce the need for institutional care. The program currently has a waitlist
124 of 9 for the St. Thomas (8) / St. John (1) District and 53 on St. Croix.

125 **Senior Community Services Employment Program**

126 SCSEP provides subsidized, part-time jobs for low-income seniors aged 55 and
127 older, offering minimum wage and on-the-job training to aid their return to the
128 workforce. This program supports community involvement and leverages their
129 wisdom and experience. Currently, there are 32 clients in the St. Thomas/St. John
130 District and 21 on St. Croix.

131 **Foster Grandparent Program/Retired Senior Volunteer Program**

132 The Foster Grandparent Program provides opportunities for seniors 55 years or
133 older, to work on a one-on-one basis with children with special needs, providing

134 each child with love and attention. Foster Grandparents are assigned to various
135 childcare agencies, institutions and schools and work a minimum of 4 hours and
136 a maximum of 8 hours per day. There are currently 20 individuals in the St.
137 Thomas/St. John district and 10 in St. Croix.

138 Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) is a senior volunteer program intended
139 for persons 55 years of age and older who are retired or semi-retired. There are
140 thirty-one volunteers: STJ 1; STT 6; and STX 24, serving at 16 different stations; STJ-1,
141 STT-6, and STX-9. It offers participants the opportunity to help meet critical
142 community needs by providing services at senior citizen centers, hospitals,
143 schools, and offices.

144 These programs are currently being evaluated and revamped as long-standing
145 programmatic concerns are being remediated such as the creation of internal
146 policies for fiscal controls and other operations.

147 **Family Caregiver Support Program**

148 The Family Caregivers Support Program (FCSP) aids family caregivers of
149 homebound elderly relatives by supporting 149 families who care for an older
150 relative, dependent grandchild, or friend. The program focuses on supporting
151 caregivers with services including in-home and institutional respite, assessments,
152 counseling, and access to Resource Centers. These centers offer staffing, group
153 sessions, referrals, advocacy, support groups, and special activities.

154 **Information and Referrals (I&R)**

155 The I&R program provides up-to-date information to Senior Citizens on the services
156 available to them in the community and connects them with the help that they
157 need. This program also provides Senior ID cards to individuals 60 and older. The
158 number of new clients served in this fiscal year is 237 on the St. Thomas / St. John
159 district and 556 on St. Croix.

160 **State Pharmaceutical Assistance Program**

161 The Pharmaceutical Assistance Program is designed to provide financial
162 assistance to seniors whose income is less than or equal to \$18,000.00 for a single
163 person or \$30,000.00 for a couple, to assist with prescription drug needs. A co-pay
164 is required for each prescription at time of purchase. To be eligible for SPAP, an
165 individual must be 60 years of age or older and must be a VI resident for at least
166 6 months. Proof of age, residency, medical status and income are required with
167 the application.

168 **Adult Protective Services**

169 The Adult Protective Services (APS) Unit offers protective services and case
170 management for 242 disabled adults aged 18-59 and 645 elderly individuals aged
171 60 and older. The Unit investigates suspected cases of abuse, neglect, and
172 financial exploitation. Staff screen and evaluate cases, arranging services such

173 as placement in 24-hour nursing homes and the Territories' Homes for the Aged.
174 This division has seen an increase in referrals and with very limited staff. Through
175 these referrals the needs of the elderly community are thoroughly identified and
176 contribute the waitlists experienced within all other programs. Currently, this unit
177 has four staff members and three on St. Thomas with only 1 Social Worker in each
178 district along with the District Managers. This program is severely understaffed,
179 requires additional Social Workers and are challenged with addressing the needs
180 of this vulnerable community. The program is working closely with its Federal
181 partners to identify how best to maximize Federal funding to support these needs.

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183 **Nutrition Program for The Elderly**

184 Commonly known as Meals on Wheels, the program offers nutritionally balanced
185 meals five to seven days a week to individuals aged 60 and older, as well as
186 disabled persons under the age of 60. Currently, 394 individuals in the St.
187 Thomas/St. John District and 540 on St. Croix benefit from this service. Meals are
188 also available at congregate sites including the Strive Center, Richmond Center,
189 Adrian Senior Center, Lucinda Millin Home, and Wilford Pedro Home for the Aged.
190 Presently, there is a waitlist of 67 people on St. Croix, with no waitlist in the St.
191 Thomas/St. John District. While the efforts initiated by this body, that is the
192 appropriation of \$100,000, was appreciated in an effort to eradicate the waitlist,

193 it was not allocated for the necessary use such as the purchase of vehicles which
194 is one of the primary challenges nor did it allow for enough sufficient time to be
195 able to hire personnel before the end of the fiscal year to achieve the goal.
196 Nevertheless, the programs continues its efforts as usual to address the waitlist as
197 best as possible. It our hope that additional funding can be provided in the new
198 fiscal year for both personnel and vehicles to address the current waitlist in its
199 entirety.

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201 **Homes for the Aged**

202 VIDHS operates two long-term residential care facilities for the elderly, offering 24-
203 hour care and nursing support at the Lucinda Millin Home. The Homes for the
204 Aged cater to senior citizens aged 60 and over, providing a supportive
205 environment that upholds their independence, dignity, and choice. Services
206 include medical, nursing, and custodial care, along with therapeutic recreational
207 activities to help residents stay active and self-sufficient. Currently, 41 residents
208 receive care: 22 at Herbert Grigg Home (HGH) on St. Croix, 12 at Queen Louise
209 Home (QLH) on St. Thomas, and 3 at Lucinda Millin Home, also on St. Thomas.
210 There is a waiting list of 51 people for entry, with 26 on St. Thomas and 25 on St.
211 Croix. Staffing and supply shortages as well as facility concerns continue to be
212 key challenges for the homes. With the assistance of Governor Bryan and through

213 internal solutions, the team is working to address long standing facility repairs and
214 are working to obtain necessary supplies and equipment such as Geri Chairs,
215 medical supplies and kitchen equipment.

216 As previously mentioned, the Department is excited to continue on its journey
217 towards building two new skilled nursing/long term care facilities. Currently the
218 department was obligated \$129M for Herbert Grigg Home for the Aged and \$72M
219 Queen Louise Home for the Aged. Additionally, approximately \$1.9M has been
220 obligated for temporary repairs and related relocation for the Queen Louise
221 Facility. This project was put out to bid, and a contractor has been selected the
222 contract is in process. Architectural design is in progress for the new construction
223 of Queen Louise and Herbert Grigg through close collaboration with the ODR and
224 these projects will be managed through the Super PMO.

225 The SCA staff works hard to address the needs of our elderly community which
226 continues to grow and has exceeded the capacity of some of our programs.
227 There is simply a higher demand than what the programs are currently able to
228 supply. The team continues to work with our federal programs, community
229 partners and the Administration to develop creative strategies to address these
230 core challenges. In many cases, while solutions have been identified, they will
231 take time to implement and for relief to be attained. Many of our Senior Programs

232 are funded wholly by General Fund allotments and do not allow for the use of
233 Federal funds. Additionally, those funded by Federal dollars are very limited in
234 what those funds can be used for. Given the department's challenges with hiring
235 staff funded wholly or in part by the General Fund due to the budget cuts seen
236 by the department in this past Fiscal Year, there has been very little individuals
237 hired into these programs over the past year. We hope that this can be addressed
238 as we move into the new Fiscal Year.

239 **CONCLUSION**

240 In closing, the Department of Human Services works diligently every day to carry
241 out its mission with the resources that are available. On behalf of Commissioner
242 Averil George, we would like to publicly thank our staff for their unwavering
243 dedication and continued commitment as well as Governor Bryan and Lt.
244 Governor Roach for their continued support of the department. This concludes
245 our testimony and we remain available to answer any questions you may have.