

VIRGIN ISLANDS OFFICE OF DISASTER RECOVERY



# TESTIMONY

**Committee on Disaster Recovery,  
Infrastructure, And Planning**

Legislature of the Virgin Islands

**PRESENTED BY:  
Graciela Rivera  
Territorial Hazard Mitigation Officer**

**January 30, 2024**

1 Good Morning, Honorable Senator Milton E. Potter, Chairman of the 35th Legislature's  
2 Committee on Disaster Recovery, Infrastructure and Planning, distinguished members of the  
3 committee, as well as fellow testifiers and the listening audience. I am Graciela Rivera,  
4 Territorial Hazard Mitigation Officer. I am here on behalf of Director Adrienne L. Williams-  
5 Octalien, Director of the Office of Disaster Recovery. It is my honor to be present and support  
6 the Department of Planning and Natural Resources with Bill No# 35-0172 which would amend  
7 Title 29 chapter 5 of the Virgin Islands Code which addresses the Territory's building codes.

8 The Office of Disaster Recovery shares with the Territory the common goal of creating a  
9 "*Pathway to Resilience*". This Office is deeply committed in its mission to construct a safe,  
10 resilient community that transforms and fortifies the Territory's infrastructure. Stronger  
11 building codes are key for mitigating the impact of natural disasters and increasing the  
12 Territories resiliency. By ensuring that both residential and commercial buildings are  
13 constructed to withstand impact of hazards such as hurricanes, floods and earthquakes, stronger  
14 building codes can significantly reduce damage.

15 Additionally, stronger building codes can prevent the loss of life by ensuring safer structures  
16 for people to shelter during a disaster.

17 Stronger building codes minimize the economic impact of disasters by limiting the destruction  
18 of properties and critical infrastructure. They can contribute to creating a safer, more resilient  
19 community for generations.

20 The *Mitigation Assessment Report Hurricanes Irma and Maria in the U.S. Virgin Islands* was  
21 released in September 2018. from the FEMA Building Science Team with support from STARR  
22 II. (Strategic Alliance for Risk Reduction). The FEMA's Building Science study the impact of  
23 natural hazards on infrastructure. The creation of this report included experts in engineering,  
24 architecture, floodplain management, building codes, wind design and critical facilities, An  
25 International Code Council representative was also an active part of this process. This FEMA

26 publication, FEMA P-2021, provided an assessment of building performance, observations,  
27 recommendations, and technical guidance. The Mitigation Assessment Team (MAT) assessed  
28 the performance of residential, commercial, and critical facilities, evaluated the performance of  
29 solar panel facilities, and investigated the effects of winds speed due to the island's topography  
30 on the infrastructure on all three islands. The MAT review process included observation on  
31 building code adoption which resulted in the development of Recovery Advisories, training, and  
32 outreach.

33 A key finding in the MAT report was that the implementation of the local building codes did not  
34 align with the then most recently adopted International Building Codes. This resulted in a  
35 recommendation to coordinate policies, strengthen design procedures, and implement systems  
36 of review and enforcement. It was also determined in the report that homes repaired under the  
37 House Protection Roofing program after Hurricane Marilyn received little or no damage during  
38 the 2017 hurricanes. These homes were repaired implementing the most recent building codes  
39 at the time.

40 There is no doubt on the value of building better, stronger, and more resilient. The adoption of  
41 the building codes to match the International Building Code will provide great assistance to this  
42 ongoing process to improve our infrastructure and will minimize or remove any confusion as we  
43 proceed with the many and varied recovery design and construction projects. It will also  
44 safeguard our ability to receive assistance with such projects in the future.

45 We would like to extend our thanks to Senator Donna Frett- Gregory for sponsoring this bill  
46 which will allow for amendments that would clarify the Virgin Islands building codes and make  
47 amendments that will allow for a more resilient and safer community.

48 Honorable Senators, we have come to the end of this brief testimony, and we want to express our  
49 sincere gratitude for your time, attention, focus and support on all aspects of recovery as we  
50 continue to "Build a Legacy of Resilience".