

**35th LEGISLATURE OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS**

**COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION & WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT**

**CHAIRPERSON – HONORABLE SENATOR MARISE C. JAMES, ESQ.**

**Thursday, September 21, 2023**



**VIRGIN ISLANDS DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES**

**TESTIMONY ON:**

*The Department of Human Services' role in Early Childhood Care and Education in the Virgin Islands and an overview of the state of childhood care and education programs under its jurisdiction.*

**PRESENTED BY ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER CARLA E. BENJAMIN**

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1 Good day, Honorable Senator Marise C. James, Esq., Chair of the Committee on Education and  
2 Workforce Development, committee members, other Senators present, and the listening and  
3 viewing audiences. I am Carla Benjamin, an Assistant Commissioner at the Virgin Islands  
4 Department of Human Services (VIDHS), presenting on behalf of Commissioner Kimberley  
5 Causey-Gomez. We, at VIDHS, are thankful for this opportunity to share information about our  
6 role in Early Childhood Care and Education in the Virgin Islands, as well as to provide an  
7 overview of the state of childhood care and education programs under our purview.  
8 Accompanying me today are Ms. Masikia Lewis and Ms. Tishma Tucker-Lans, the  
9 Administrators of the Office of Head Start and the Office of Child Care and Regulatory Services  
10 (OCCRS), respectively.

#### 11 **VIDHS' AUTHORITY**

12 The Virgin Islands Department of Human Services, as established in Title 3 Chapter 24 of the  
13 Virgin Islands Code has been statutorily assigned a vast range of key duties and responsibilities  
14 for administering social services in this territory. Specific to the matters before us today, but not  
15 intended to be exhaustive, are VIDHS' responsibilities to:

- 16 • establish, administer, coordinate, and supervise all publicly financed services and  
17 programs for "clients" including children and youth [3 V.I.C. § 431 (a)]
- 18 • "... establish standards for and license and supervise child care and welfare services,  
19 institutions and programs provided by private individuals or child care agencies" [3 V.I.C.  
20 § 431 (b)(5)]



- 21 • serve as the “state agency” for all programs pertaining to youth, children, handicapped,  
22 elderly and low-income adults and families whenever such designation is required by  
23 federal law for the purpose of participating in federal programs [3 V.I.C. § 432 (a)]
- 24 • 34 V.I.C. Chapter 13 Child Day Care Facility Licensure

25 It is worth noting that although VIDHS provides services to clients across the lifespan from birth  
26 to death (including burial), through its eighty-four (84) programs, our focus today will be those  
27 services and programs in early childhood education.

## 28 **PRIMARY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION SERVICES**

29 The Virgin Islands Department of Human Services provides a continuum of services for children  
30 and families throughout the territory. These services are frequently preventive, protective,  
31 ameliorative, and restorative as situations require; however, the two divisions highlighted today  
32 are focused primarily on early childhood education and services. They are our Office of Head  
33 Start which administers the Head Start Program and the Office of Child Care and Regulatory  
34 Services which administers the territory’s child care licensing, quality improvement and subsidy  
35 programs. Both divisions are key stakeholders in early childhood education and provide primary  
36 foundational early childhood education services for the territory.

37 **The Head Start Program** is administered by VIDHS through a federal grant from the U. S.  
38 Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Administration for Children and Families  
39 (ACF) Office of Head Start (OHS). The Head Start grant is a five-year grant for which VIDHS  
40 must repeatedly successfully compete to retain. The Government of the Virgin Islands (GVI),



41 through VIDHS, has successfully retained and administered this grant since 1966. The Head  
 42 Start program promotes the school readiness of children between the ages of three and five  
 43 years old, from low-income families by providing education, health, nutrition, disability, and other  
 44 services. All areas of Head Start operations are guided by the Head Start Performance  
 45 Standards, which are the official Head Start guidelines and are reflected in the Code of Federal  
 46 Regulations. To meet the requirements for Head Start selection, children must be three years  
 47 old by December 31st and up to five years old at enrollment. In addition to age guidelines, Head  
 48 Start is an income eligibility-based program intended for low-income families. Children are  
 49 deemed to be more eligible, as the percentile below the federally established poverty level, their  
 50 household income increases. However, ten percent of Head Start enrollment is designated for  
 51 children with disabilities irrespective of household income. The program seeks to enhance their  
 52 students’ development in all domains – approaches to learning, social and emotional, cognitive,  
 53 language and literacy, and physical – through the provision of comprehensive high-quality  
 54 services.

55 The VIDHS Head Start’s funded enrollment is 794 (500 students in 15 classrooms on St. Croix,  
 56 274 children in 14 classrooms on St. Thomas and 20 children in 1 classroom on St. John).

57 All classrooms are to operate 5 days per week for 10 months per year for 170 days per year.

	<b>St. Croix</b>	<b>St. Thomas</b>	<b>St. John</b>
Full Day Classrooms (7:45 – 3:00)	20	9	0
Extended Day Classrooms (7:30 – 5:30)	5	6	0
Dual Option	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>0</b>

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59 The typical Head Start daily schedule offers time for children to participate in both group activities  
60 and independent child choice activities. This includes the morning routine of participation in  
61 breakfast, and Circle Time. Circle Time is the opportunity to greet everyone and to start the day.  
62 Activities include discussion on the calendar, weather, introduction of new letters and numbers  
63 of the week and to introduce the day's activities. Thereafter, children have an opportunity to  
64 select developmentally appropriate activities that encourage learning in all areas of development  
65 as well as curriculum facilitated activities. During the afternoon hours children participate in the  
66 family style lunch, quiet time, and story time. Children have an opportunity to nap or rest quietly.  
67 The day ends with children receiving a nutritious snack and activities as they await pick-up by  
68 their parents.

69 The VIDHS Head Start program well represents a program that addresses **“early childhood**  
70 **care, health, nutrition, play, early learning, social services, and parental involvement**  
71 **including promoting family literacy”** the areas identified in this committee’s inquiries. By  
72 design, the Head Start program provides **early childhood care**, free of cost to children across  
73 the territory. The program includes a **health** component consisting of Health Managers and  
74 Health Aides. Health services include vision, speech and hearing screening and oral/dental  
75 health services. One of the first tasks completed by the health component is connecting families  
76 to a medical home (a public clinic, private physician, hospital, etc.). The program has a **nutrition**  
77 component, employing Nutrition Managers, Nutrition Supervisors and Food Service Workers  
78 who provide Head Start Students with breakfast, lunch and nutritious snack options guided by  
79 the requirements of the federal school lunch program, accessed through VIDE’s Special Nutrition



80 Programs. The inclusion of **play** is a requirement of the Head Start experience. In addition to  
81 indoor play activities, the Head Start program requires that its learning environments include  
82 playgrounds with shaded areas. During calendar year 2022, VIDHS Head Start program with  
83 \$3.5M in Office of Head Start disaster recovery funding installed 7 new state of the art  
84 playgrounds across the territory. In instances where Head Start sites do not have access to  
85 playgrounds even temporarily, children are transported to nearby approved sites to allow for  
86 outdoor play. The program employs well-credentialed Preschool Teachers and Assistant  
87 Teachers guided and monitored by Education Supervisors and Education Managers that ensure  
88 provision of high-quality **early learning**, utilizing supportive and developmentally appropriate  
89 learning environments and by implementing research-based curricula and assessment to  
90 promote the developmental progress of all children. The program has a **social services**  
91 component with responsibilities conducted by Social Services Aides and Social Services  
92 Managers. The social services component provides supportive services to Head Start families  
93 by assisting the families with advocacy and referral services and facilitating connections to  
94 services that will allow Head Start parents to become self-sufficient. The program has Parent  
95 Involvement Coordinators and Parent Involvement Aides that are tasked with providing **parent**  
96 **involvement** activities and education, to keep Head Start families engaged in their children's  
97 early learning experience and renders them knowledgeable about their children's growth and  
98 development. The program recognizes parents as children's first teachers and makes diligent  
99 efforts toward improving family literacy. Head Start also includes key personnel such as Family  
100 Services Coordinators and Disabilities Coordinators that also work with Head Start families to



101 ensure a comprehensive and positive early childhood experience, which excites and prepares  
102 children for kindergarten. The program encourages parents to come into the classrooms to  
103 observe and to take part in their children's educational experience. Parent volunteers receive  
104 First Aid and CPR training and parents that are inside the classrooms and become interested in  
105 teaching can receive their CDA certificate with funding from head Start.

106 The Head Start Program implements the HighScope Preschool Curriculum, which is aligned with  
107 the Early Learning Outcome Framework (ELOF) as well as with the Common Core, which the  
108 Virgin Islands Department of Education (VIDE) implements, and the Virgin Islands Early  
109 Learning Guidelines (VIELG). The VIELG reflects the developmental expectations for the  
110 knowledge, skills and dispositions children need to prepare them to succeed in kindergarten.

111 They are designed to be used as a guide and tool for early care and education teachers, parents,  
112 and others living and working with young children to support children's individual development.

113 The developmental screening tools used by the Head Start Program include the Ages and  
114 Stages Questionnaires (ASQ-3) and the Ages and Stages Questionnaire – Social Emotional  
115 (ASQ-SE) as the developmental screening tools.

116 The Head Start Program upgraded its assessment system to the HighScope Child Observation  
117 Record (COR) Advantage, an assessment tool designed for children ages birth to six (6) years  
118 and aligned with the HighScope curriculum in 2019-20 school year. The Program has fully  
119 implemented COR Advantage, collecting data three times per year – December, March, and  
120 June.



121 The Head Start program's governance structure welcomes and requires parental involvement in  
122 all areas of programming. The Policy Council, comprised of parents of head start students, is  
123 one of two governance entities (the other being the Governing Board) that wield decision-making  
124 authority on everything from selection and hiring of Head Start staff to utilization of Head Start  
125 funds.

126 The Head Start program has an MOU and partners with the Virgin Islands Department of Health,  
127 Infants and Toddlers Program (Part C of IDEA for infants and toddlers with disabilities – early  
128 intervention) and VIDE (Part B, Section 619 of IDEA – Free Appropriate Public Education for  
129 children ages 3-5 with disabilities), agencies responsible for providing services to children with  
130 disabilities and/or developmental delays and their families. Head Start receives referrals from  
131 Part C as part of their transition process six months prior to the child's third birthday as outlined  
132 in the MOU. Children with an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) when they enter Head  
133 Start are served by specialists within the classroom, as Head Start is the child's natural  
134 environment. Specialists implement an integrative therapy model and consult with teachers.

135 The interagency agreement between Head Start and Part B outlines each program's mandates  
136 for the provision of services to children with developmental delays and/or disabilities and their  
137 respective responsibilities. Referrals go both ways – Head Start refers children to Part B when  
138 there is a concern about a child's development as noted from screening and/or COR Advantage  
139 results or from parent or teacher observation for evaluation; and Part B refers children to Head  
140 Start who have an IEP when they believe the child could benefit from the program, as it serves  
141 as the "Least Restrictive Environment."





142 Through successful applications for the federal Office of Head Start, disaster recovery dollars  
143 and awards more than \$42M, the VIDHS Head Start program recently began the demolition  
144 phase of major construction projects at six (6) sites across the territory. Those sites are the Cruz  
145 Bay Head Start on the island of St. John, the Lindbergh Bay Head Start, Bolongo Head Start  
146 and Minnetta Mitchell Nutrition and Storage site on the island of St. Thomas and the Concordia  
147 Head Start and the Anna's Hope Administration Building on St. Croix. These completed projects  
148 will create state of the art early childhood education physical environments that also provide  
149 hardened spaces in times of disaster.

150 **The Office of Child Care and Regulatory Services** is comprised of three components, each  
151 of which serves a vital function in the early child education arena. The components are the  
152 **Licensing Unit** which licenses/certifies and monitors all private and government-operated child  
153 care facilities. This unit conducts ongoing monitoring visits to child care and learning programs  
154 in the territory to ensure that children are in safe, stimulating, and healthy environments. The  
155 **Quality Improvement Unit** provides services to increase the quality of child care through  
156 consumer education, caregiver/teacher training and provision of resources for quality  
157 improvement. The **Subsidy Resource and Referral Unit** administers the federal Child Care  
158 Development Fund Program (CCDF) that provides subsidies to parents and families for child  
159 care. The Child Care Development Fund program is a key prevention program within the territory  
160 addressing the growing need for quality child care for working parents as well as for parents  
161 preparing to enter the work world. Like the Head Start program, the Child Care Subsidy Program  
162 is an eligibility program based upon income and is intended for lower income families, however



163 an important qualifying caveat is parent applicants must be employed or engaged in education  
 164 and/or training for at least 30 hours per week, to receive child care subsidy benefits. While the  
 165 child care program provides subsidies for afterschool and summer programs, the program does  
 166 not provide subsidies for school-aged children during the hours of school operations. Child care  
 167 subsidy recipients may range in age from 1 day old to under 13 years old. Subsidies can be  
 168 provided to individuals with disabilities up to age 19 years of age. By federal OCC rules, children  
 169 that are deemed eligible for child care subsidies remain eligible for 12 months regardless of  
 170 household income changes.

171 While the Head Start program checks all the boxes related to this Committee’s inquiry, the Office  
 172 of Child Care and Regulatory Services provides training, training funds to allow private child care  
 173 facilities to elevate the staff credentials, create improved early education physical environments  
 174 and move intentionally toward provision of high-quality early education services.

175 The following is a snapshot of child care provider availability within the territory.

	<b>St. Thomas</b>	<b>St. John</b>	<b>St. Croix</b>	<b>Territory-wide</b>
<b># of Facilities</b>	48	8	49	<b>105</b>
<b># of CCDF Facilities</b>	20	3	26	<b>49</b>
<b># of Programs</b>	81	9	92	<b>182</b>
<b># of Head Starts</b>	15	0	22	<b>37</b>
<b># of Govt Afterschool</b>	7	0	1	<b>8</b>
<b># of Afterschool</b>	12	1	9	<b>22</b>
<b># of Early Head Start</b>	0	0	2	<b>2</b>
<b># of Granny Preschools</b>	2	1	7	<b>10</b>
<b># Of Day Care</b>	29	4	27	<b>60</b>
<b># Of Group Homes</b>	22	3	19	<b>44</b>
<b># of Family Home</b>	1	0	6	<b>7</b>
<b># of Residential</b>	1	0	2	<b>3</b>
<b># of FFN</b>	0	0	5	<b>5</b>

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177 Since the return to non-pandemic life, the OCCRS has implemented state plan amendments and  
178 program initiatives that have positively impacted the hard hit child care industry, essentially early  
179 childhood education. These initiatives can change the child care landscape and will potentially  
180 result in ground-breaking gains for the child care industry in the US Virgin Islands.

181 We have amended our state plan to allow for categorical eligibility of Essential Workers  
182 regardless of income. We have promoted our non-traditional hours subsidy benefits option. We  
183 have made available tens of millions of federal grant dollars to child care providers through a  
184 series of mini grants and crisis stabilization grants to enhance child care services and capacity.  
185 In June 2023, the VIDHS OCCRS successfully submitted a Project Impact Application and will  
186 be receiving dedicated technical assistance to reintroduce and implement the territory's Quality  
187 Rating and Improvement System (QRIS). The QRIS will provide a standard rating system by  
188 which the quality of services of child care providers within the territory can be assessed and  
189 rated using the same standard for all providers. The official in-person kick-off of the technical  
190 assistance for the relaunch of this key initiative is scheduled for October 2023.

191 The VIDHS through the University of the Virgin Islands – Center for Excellence in Leadership  
192 and Learning (UVI-CELL) has completed a market rate survey and narrow cost analysis of the  
193 child care market in the territory and its findings provide statistical support to raise child care  
194 subsidy rates to up to the 100<sup>th</sup> percentile of child care cost, a move supported and  
195 recommended by the federal Office of Child Care.

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198 **PARTNERSHIPS, INTIATIVES AND COLLABORATIONS**

199 The Department of Human Services, through these key divisions participated in the territory's  
200 Program Performance Evaluation Plan completed in January 2021, a required output of the  
201 Preschool Development Grant – Birth through 5, more commonly known as the 'PDG B-5" grant  
202 of which VIDHS was the grantee. The effort was driven by the State Entity, the University of the  
203 Virgin Islands – Caribbean Exploratory Research Center (UVI-CERC) and worked towards  
204 creating an Early Childhood Education Mixed Delivery System Strategic Plan to facilitate  
205 seamlessness of services for children and families across all service providers and stakeholders  
206 in the early childhood education field. Active participants in that project included public and  
207 private entities and their clients – the users of the early childhood education services.

208 Challenges do exist in early childhood education. Efforts to create an integrated shared database  
209 of children within our systems across governmental and nongovernmental agencies have been  
210 unsuccessful. There is no reliable and consistent means of tracking children within the systems  
211 to identify duplication of efforts or duplication of services, which could potentially result in service  
212 opportunities for more children. There is also no accurate, shareable means of tracking  
213 outcomes for children as they navigate through early childhood education. Additionally, there is  
214 competition among programs for human resource capital in our limited pool of credentialed,  
215 trained professionals. All early childhood education programs compete for the same  
216 teachers/teaching staff. More recently, there is competition even among government agencies  
217 for the same children. This poses an unanticipated challenge as the territory suffered a  
218 significant drop in population following the catastrophic hurricanes and did not experience a



219 regrowth in numbers before the advent of the COVID pandemic. Programs such as the Head  
220 Start program continue to experience depressed numbers.

221 As this lengthy testimony has demonstrated, there is much to discuss and much that is  
222 commendable about the state of early childhood education in the territory. There are gaps to be  
223 filled but opportunities outweigh the deficiencies and the partners in the early childhood  
224 education arena consistently work well together, a condition that can intentionally be improved.

225 I take this opportunity to thank the dedicated and hard-working staff at VIDHS and the other  
226 governmental providers of early childhood education in the territory. We would like to thank the  
227 University of the Virgin Islands for its constant readiness to work collaboratively with DHS in all  
228 matters relevant to services provision to the people of the Virgin Islands. With the continued  
229 support of the Executive Branch, members of this legislative body, Governor Albert Bryan, Jr.,  
230 and Lieutenant Governor Tregenza Roach, DHS will continue to be committed to **“Working  
231 Together to Make a Difference”** for the people of the Virgin Islands. Thank you.