

35th LEGISLATURE OF THE U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS

COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY, JUSTICE & PUBLIC SAFETY

Chairperson Senator Kenneth L. Gittens

Tuesday, June 11, 2024



VIRGIN ISLANDS DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES

TESTIMONY ON

DHS' involvement, collaborative efforts, and preparations
for the 2024 Atlantic Hurricane Season

1 Good morning, Chairperson Senator Kenneth L. Gittens, Honorable members of the
2 Committee on Homeland Security, Justice & Public Safety, staff of the 35th Legislature,
3 and everyone viewing or listening.

4 My name is Carla Benjamin, and I serve as an Assistant Commissioner for the Virgin
5 Islands Department of Human Services (VIDHS). I am here on behalf of the Honorable
6 Commissioner Averil E. George. With me today is Yvette C. Henry, our Community
7 Affairs Coordinator and Mass Care Lead. We are here today to testify on VIDHS'
8 involvement, collaborative efforts, and preparations for the 2024 Atlantic Hurricane
9 Season.

10 Overview of Department Responsibilities

11 At VIDHS, we take a proactive approach to disaster preparedness, response, and
12 recovery. We serve as the lead agency for Emergency Support Function 6 (ESF6) – Mass
13 Care, Emergency Assistance, Temporary Housing, and Human Services Annex. This
14 critical function involves coordination with multiple agencies and organizations, including
15 the American Red Cross (ARC), VI Department of Health (VIDOH), VI Waste

16 Management Agency (VIWMA), VI Police Department (VIPD), VI National Guard (VING),
17 VI Fire and Emergency Medical Services (VIFEMS), VI Department of Education (VIDE),
18 Department of Sports, Parks, and Recreation (DPSR), the Office of the Governors (OOG),
19 Territorial Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Coordinator and Virgin Islands
20 Territorial Emergency Management Agency (VITEMA). These collaborations ensure
21 comprehensive support for our community before, during and after disasters.

22 When it becomes evident that a Hurricane of any category is likely to directly impact
23 the territory, VIDHS secures operations for its facilities and its most vulnerable clients
24 and encourages staff to secure their homes and families while the event is about 5 days
25 out, in anticipation of VIDHS' public-facing activities beginning in earnest.

26 Upon a National Disaster Declaration issued by the Governor, VIDHS employees, all of
27 whom are essential personnel, take on emergency support function responsibilities that
28 allow us to operate under Incident Command. Managers assume Emergency Support
29 Coordinator (ESC) roles in support of ESF6. Operations are then executed through

30 missions and orders given through the leadership structure to ensure effective and
31 coordinated disaster response and recovery efforts.

32 VIDHS' public-facing activities include increased messaging with the assistance of
33 VITEMA and the Joint Information Center (JIC). Shelter volunteers are put on notice
34 for possible shelter openings, increased engagement for logistics related to shelter
35 opening occurs between VIDHS and its primary shelter partners regarding shelter
36 staffing, transportation, shelter set up, security, admissions, feeding, etc., in the event
37 that shelters do open.

38 Preparedness Initiatives for Hurricane Season 2024

39 Shelter Preparation Drill

40 The Department was a key participant in the Hurricane Preparedness and Initial
41 Recovery - Capstone 2024 Exercise from May 20 – May 24, 2024. This was a full-scale drill,
42 which involved the setting up of a shelter. During the capstones, all support agency
43 partners are involved in prestaging of equipment, and our volunteers role-play going
44 through the intake/shelter admission process. All facets of sheltering are taken into

45 consideration i.e., persons with access and functional needs (AFN) and Pet Sheltering.
46 Each day featured different USVI Readiness Initiative Workshops. This training provides
47 our staff with the latest information and best practices in hurricane preparedness and
48 response, ensuring that we are ready to meet any challenges that come our way.

49 Trainings and Conferences

50 This year, VIDHS staff attended the National Hurricane Conference 2024 and
51 participated in various trainings, classes, and exercises to enhance our preparedness
52 and response strategies. This national conference allowed VIDHS and other VI agencies
53 engaged in disaster management to learn about how other jurisdictions are managing
54 disaster preparedness and for the territory to reciprocate.

55 Congregate Shelters

56 The Department conducted shelter inspections of key locations identified for evacuation
57 shelters, ensuring we can provide safe havens for residents during emergencies.
58 Inspections were conducted with partner agencies such as ARC, Federal Emergency

59 management Agency (FEMA), VIDOH, VIDE, DSPR, VIDA and VITEMA. These shelters
 60 will be jointly staffed by VIDHS and American Red Cross volunteers.

61 Shelter Capacities:

62 St. Thomas:

Site	Pre-landfall Capacity	Post-landfall Capacity	Pet-Sheltering
Ivanna Eudora Kean High School	782	390	
Lockhart Elementary School/Cancryn Junior High School	248	123	Yes

63 St. Croix:

Site	Pre-landfall Capacity	Post-landfall Capacity	Pet-Sheltering
St. Croix Educational Complex	1,7247	631	Yes
DC Canegata Recreation Center	161	80	

64

65 St. John:

Site	Pre-landfall Capacity	Post-landfall Capacity	Pet-Sheltering
Gifft Hill School	180	90	
Adrian Senior Center	15	8	Yes

66

67 Water Island:

Site	Pre-landfall Capacity	Post-landfall Capacity	Pet-Sheltering
Water Island Fire House		53	

68 Volunteer Shelter:

- 69 • Beeston Hill Gym in St. Croix is being vetted and engaged to bring their site at
70 Beeston Hill St. Croix into our pool of resources.

71 Additional Pet Sheltering:

- 72 • Canine, Cats, & Critters on St. John provides additional support for pet sheltering.

73 Shelter Pre-Registration

74 Virgin Islands residents considering an Evacuation Shelter can pre-register with VIDHS
75 from today until Friday until Monday June 24th, 2024, at (340) 715-6935 between the
76 hours of 9 am and 5 pm. This pre-registration process helps us prepare adequately and
77 ensures that we can provide the necessary accommodation for all residents. Registration
78 forms are also available on VITEMA's website at www.vitema.vi.gov.

79

80 Medical Special Needs Shelters

81 The VI Department of Health (VIDOH) is the lead agency ESF 8 (–Public Health and
82 Medical Services Annex), for managing Medical Special Needs Shelters, ensuring that
83 individuals with specific medical requirements receive appropriate care during
84 emergencies. While VIDOH oversees these shelters, the Department of Human Services
85 plays a crucial supportive role, working closely with VIDOH to coordinate efforts and
86 ensure seamless operations.

87 For those with medical special needs, pre-registration with VIDHS or coordination with
88 VIDOH is essential before heading to a shelter. Pre-registered individuals can arrange
89 transportation through VITRAN on St. Croix or St. Thomas. Each individual admitted to
90 a Medical Special Needs shelter must be accompanied by a caretaker to provide the
91 necessary support. Our collaborative efforts with VIDOH ensure that these specialized
92 shelters are adequately prepared to meet the unique needs of our vulnerable
93 populations during emergencies.

94

95 Pet Sheltering

96 Service animals are allowed at all shelters, ensuring that those who rely on them are
97 not separated during emergencies. For pets (dogs and cats), specific shelters are
98 designated: Lockhart Elementary on St. Thomas and the Educational Complex on St.
99 Croix. Pet owners must bring cages, food, medicine, leashes, and other supplies, and
100 are responsible for their pets' daily care. This includes bringing litter boxes for cats and
101 cleaning up after dogs.

102 We encourage all pet owners to have a plan for their pets, which includes having enough
103 food and water for at least seven days, a cage, leash, medication, and other essential
104 supplies. Planning for pets is crucial to ensure their safety and well-being during
105 emergencies.

106 Points of Distribution (PODs)

107 The VI Department of Human Services (VIDHS) leads the efforts to identify, manage,
108 and maintain Points of Distribution (PODs) for commodities, specifically food and water
109 following a storm if residents are unable to access those items through the usual means,

110 such as supermarkets. This critical operation is supported by VITEMA, the VI National
111 Guard, the VI Police Department, the Department of Education, volunteers, and faith-
112 based organizations.

113 VITEMA oversees the Distribution Management Plan, ensuring that the process runs
114 smoothly and efficiently. FEMA plays a crucial role by maintaining warehouses on St.
115 Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix, each stocked with a 10-day supply of food and water.
116 These supplies are calculated to provide two shelf-stable meals and three liters of water
117 per person per day.

118 Once a storm passes, the VI National Guard transports the commodities to pre-identified
119 POD sites. Upon arrival, the National Guard sets up operations for the day, ensuring the
120 food and water are ready for distribution.

121 The actual distribution at these POD sites is managed by VIDHS, with substantial
122 support from the Department of Education. Faith-based organizations and volunteers
123 also play an essential role in assisting with the distribution of supplies. Additionally,

124 when available and coordinated with FEMA and VITEMA, "Blue Tarps" are also
125 distributed at each POD site to help residents secure their homes.

126 POD operations will cease once normal food supply chains are restored, and banking
127 systems, including credit cards, SNAP, D-SNAP, or ATMs, are functional again. This
128 coordinated effort ensures that residents receive necessary supplies efficiently and
129 effectively in the aftermath of a storm.

130 Senior Registry

131 Act No 8058 mandates VIDHS to maintain a voluntary Senior Registry for individuals 60
132 years and older, living alone, or with disabilities. Currently, there are 907 individuals
133 listed in the registry. Before, during and after a storm, our team utilizes a mass
134 messaging system to provide storm-related information and support to these
135 individuals. The registry, which has been endorsed by AARP of the US Virgin Islands,
136 helps us identify and assist our most vulnerable residents quickly and efficiently during
137 disasters.

138 The Registry also helps Emergency Support responders and Support Service volunteers
139 establish contact and communication with the individual, providing aid and support in
140 the event of a man-made or natural disaster. It also places individuals into categories,
141 including those who would need special transportation such as lift adaptive buses or an
142 ambulance.

143 VIDHS submits the information collected from the registry to VITEMA, VI Fire
144 Emergency Medical Services and the Virgin Islands National Guard to identify and rescue
145 vulnerable populations in disaster situations, or if there is a medical or other emergency.

146 This information is confidential and is strictly used for no other purpose than to assist
147 the person in the registry.

148 Individuals interested in registering themselves or a family member can visit the
149 Department of Human Services, the Bureau of Motor Vehicles, and the Virgin Islands
150 Elections System to fill out the registry form or simply call one of our VIDHS offices to
151 provide your information and have the form filled out for you.

152

153 Community Outreach and Education

154 Public awareness and education are key components of our preparedness strategy. We
155 regularly conduct outreach programs to educate the community about hurricane
156 preparedness, including how to create emergency plans, pack emergency kits, and stay
157 informed during a storm. We also emphasize the importance of pre-registering for
158 shelters and the senior registry to ensure that everyone receives the necessary support
159 during emergencies.

160 Technology and Innovation in Disaster Response

161 At the Department of Human Services, we continuously seek innovative solutions to
162 enhance our disaster response capabilities. By leveraging advanced technologies, we
163 aim to improve our efficiency and effectiveness in managing emergencies.

164 One significant advancement is the implementation of the Patient Unified Lookup
165 System for Emergencies (PULSE) platform in 2022. This healthcare IT program
166 significantly upgrades our Emergency and Disaster Response capabilities by allowing
167 VIDHS essential workers and disaster healthcare volunteers to access electronic health

168 information for victims and evacuees during large-scale disasters. With PULSE, we can
169 quickly obtain critical health data, facilitating better care and coordination during
170 emergencies.

171 Furthermore, at the Joint operation Command Center, VIDHS trains and coordinates
172 with VITEMA, FEMA, fellow government agencies and experts from the National Weather
173 Service to track all aspects of disaster preparedness and response across the territory
174 on WebEOC, our virtual emergency operation center, a platform which provides a real-
175 time common operating picture and resource request management tool for emergency
176 managers at the local and state levels.

177 This tool is essential during exercises, drills, local or regional emergencies, and statewide
178 emergencies. VIDHS Emergency Support Coordinators (ESCs) are required to be trained
179 and registered on WebEOC, ensuring they can effectively manage resources and
180 respond to incidents in real-time.

181

182

183 Conclusion

184 In closing, I want to thank Governor Albert Bryan, Jr., and Lieutenant Governor
185 Tregenza Roach for their leadership and guidance. I also want to express my gratitude
186 to the dedicated employees of the Department of Human Services, whose hard work
187 and commitment are vital to our preparedness.