

Virgin Islands Fire and Emergency Medical Services

Committee on Homeland Security, Justice, and Public Safety

35th Legislature of the Virgin Islands



June 11, 2024

Presented By: Antonio O. Stevens, Director

Good morning, Honorable Senator Kenneth L. Gittens, Chairman of the Committee on Homeland Security, Justice and Public Safety, other distinguished Committee members, and the listening and viewing audience.

I am Antonio Stevens, Director of the Virgin Islands Fire and Emergency Medical Services (VIFEMS). Accompanying me are Mr. Klebert Titus, Fire Chief of the St. Croix District, Mr. Robert Bryan, EMS Chief of the St. Croix District, Mr. Clarence Stephenson, Fire Chief of the St. Thomas/St. John District, Mr. Victor Adams, EMS Chief of the St. Thomas/St. John District, Mr. Eustace Grant Jr., Deputy Chief of St. Thomas, and Mr. Magabe Calixte, Deputy Chief of St. John.

We appear before you today to discuss the Virgin Islands Fire and Emergency Medical Services' preparedness for the upcoming hurricane season. I will provide testimony on behalf of the agency, and the Chiefs will join me in answering any questions you may have.

VIFEMS is an all-hazards, emergency response agency, tasked with protecting life and property. Our core functions include fire suppression, fire prevention, emergency medical response, HazMat response, and search and rescue.

In the event of a hurricane, VIFEMS serves as the coordinating agency for Emergency Support Functions ESF 4 (Firefighting), ESF 9 (Search & Rescue), and ESF 10 (Oil & HazMat). We are also a supporting agency for ESF 8 (Public Health & Medical Support) and ESF 15 (Public Information).

To ensure readiness, we maintain a Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP). The COOP establishes protocols that ensure operations will continue after a disaster and covers areas such as the delegation of authority, personnel safety and accountability, and repositioning of resources. Our COOP was recently revised and exercised with the Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency (VITEMA).

Seeking to minimize disruptions to our operations, a major focus of our preparedness efforts has been ensuring the availability of critical equipment and supplies during hurricane season. In recent weeks, our fleet maintenance team has worked diligently to bring several apparatus and ambulances back in service. Additionally, medical supplies and equipment totaling over \$100,000 have been ordered to improve our readiness and prevent outbreaks similar to the COVID-19 pandemic. Orders have also been placed for handheld radios, safety vests, and other items.

To further prepare for hurricane season, we continue to engage with key partners such as VITEMA. We attend meetings, participate in exercises, and work to ensure our representatives at the Emergency Operations Centers (EOC) are knowledgeable about the EOC's procedures, including the use of Web EOC.

Working with another critical partner, the Bureau of Information Technology, we are now able to take advantage of mobile radio base sites, that may be deployed in emergencies to improve communication.

This hurricane season, VIFEMS stands ready to support the territory.

In the event of a hurricane, we will double the number of personnel assigned to each station, in anticipation of increased call volume. Our crews will secure our facilities and equipment and will provide essential emergency services until conditions are deemed unsafe.

On St. John, crews assigned to the Cruz Bay Fire Station will be relocated to the Westin Resort as that station is currently housed in a modular facility. Operations based out of the Morris DeCastro Clinic and the Coral Bay Fire Station will remain unchanged.

The ambulance boat, the Star of Life, will continue to operate until the U.S. Coast Guard closes the port. Once the port is closed, the boat will be secured. Should it sustain damage, we have an MOU in place with Caneel Bay for the use of their vessel.

On St. Thomas, the Fortuna Fire Station will be closed if we are to be impacted by a hurricane above a Category 1. Crews and equipment assigned to the station will be reassigned to the Emile Berry Fire Station in Dorothea. No other major change will be made to operations. Fire and EMS crews will continue to operate from their assigned stations until they can no longer safely respond due to weather conditions.

On St. Croix, the Cotton Valley Fire Station may be closed depending on the severity of the storm. In the event of the station's closure, crews and equipment will be relocated to the Richmond Fire Station. Operations at all other stations will

remain unchanged, and crews will continue to respond until it is no longer safe to do so.

Recent downpours have presented some infrastructure weaknesses at the Cotton Valley and Richmond fire stations, where roof leaks have been identified. Members of our staff have volunteered to assist with the necessary repairs, and we are working closely with them to ensure these issues are addressed. We are grateful for their willingness to assist, and to them, I would like to say thank you.

I would also like to thank the men and women who show up to work daily, ready to serve the community in less than desirable living conditions. I assure you this is not the norm, and I will do my best to improve conditions sooner rather than later.

This concludes my testimony today. The Chiefs and I welcome any questions you may have.

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“Serving with Purpose and Intent”