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Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency Overview



PRESENTED BY

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DIRECTOR

**VIRGIN ISLANDS TERRITORIAL
EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AGENCY**

Submitted to

SENATOR KENNETH L. GITTENS, CHAIRMAN

Senate Committee on Homeland Security, Justice & Public Safety

Earle B. Ottley Legislative Chambers

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3 Good morning, Senator Kenneth L. Gittens, Chairman of the Committee on Homeland Security,
4 Justice, and Public Safety and all other senators present, legislative staff and those in the viewing
5 and listening audience. I am Daryl D. Jaschen, Director of the Virgin Islands Territorial
6 Emergency Management Agency (VITEMA). Present with me today are Deputy Director of
7 Finance & Administration, Mr. Winston Simon and Deputy Director of Human Resources & Labor
8 Relations, Ms. Merlinda Philomene. The purpose of this testimony to is to provide the committee
9 an agency overview relative to operations, initiatives, capital projects, staffing, infrastructure,
10 equipment, planning, challenges, and other related areas.

11 Introduction

12 The Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency receives its authority from the VI
13 Code, Title 23, Internal Security and Public Order, Chapter 10, Virgin Islands Territorial
14 Emergency Management Act, with Subchapters on Emergencies and Major Disasters, Homeland
15 Security, Emergency Management Assistance Compact, and 9-1-1 Emergency System.

16 Organizational Structure

17 For continued successful execution of its duties and responsibilities VITEMA is organized into
18 the following directorates: Operations, Planning & Preparedness, Logistics, Human Resources &
19 Labor Relations, Finance & Administration, Grants, and Public Information, all of which
20 personnel funding is primarily through the Government of the US Virgin Islands.

21 Per the VI Code, Territorial Offices of Public Assistance and Hazard Mitigation, focused on
22 recovery operations, are organized under VITEMA and personnel are 100% Federally funded.
23 Under Executive Order 487-2019 dated 17 June 2019, both Public Assistance and Hazard
24 Mitigation were administratively placed under the Office of Disaster Recovery (ODR) for
25 temporary operational purposes.

26 Per the VI Code, VITEMA maintains the 9-1-1 Emergency System with 9-1-1 operators funded
27 by the GVI and under a United Steelworkers Collective Bargaining Unit. Approximately \$1
28 million dollars a year, of federal funds, is available for 9-1-1 system maintenance and upgrade,
29 through Federal Communication Center (FCC) 911 Fees, locally collected by
30 telecommunications providers and sent to the Territorial Office of Management and Budget
31 (OMB).

32 Finally, and under the VI Code, VITEMA maintains a Fusion Center, 100% federally funded. In
33 general, Fusion Centers, created following 9/11 under the Department of Homeland Security, are
34 state-owned and operated centers that serve as focal points in states for the receipt, analysis,
35 gathering and sharing of threat-related information between State, Local, Tribal and Territorial,
36 federal and private sector partners. The National Network of Fusion Centers is the hub of much
37 of the two-way intelligence and information flow. Individually, each Fusion Center is a vital
38 resource for integrating information from national and local sources to prevent and respond to all
39 threats and hazards.

40 Overall, VITEMA has an authorized workforce of 149 (69 GVI funded / 80 Federal funded) and
41 an annual budget of approximately \$15 million dollars (\$6.3 million GVI / \$8.7 million Federal),
42 42% GVI and 58% Federal.

43 Additions to the VI Code

44 Following some painful lessons learned from Hurricane Irma and Hurricane Maria in 2017, the
45 32nd legislature enacted two critical additions to the VI Code stemmed at preventing loss of lives
46 following a major disaster. The first, Act 8058, created a Senior Registry which is managed by
47 the Department of Human Services and the second, Act 8151, amended Title 23, Chapter 10,
48 sections 1006 and 1007 of the Virgin Islands Code to provide that the Virgin Islands Emergency
49 Management Plan include a protocol for medical patients and others who need to be evacuated
50 off-island. It further provides that long-term plans be provided for these persons upon their return
51 to the territory. In support of Act 8151, the Territory now has the ESF-8 Patient Movement and
52 Patient Evacuation Plan Annex of the VITEMA Territorial Emergency Operations Plan, which is
53 maintained by the Department of Health and is current as of August 2022. The Senior Registry is
54 for seniors over age 60 who live alone or are physically challenged, regardless of age. Currently
55 there are 813 individuals on the Senior Registry, with 457 on St. Thomas, 258 on St. Croix, 97
56 on St. John, and 1 on Water Island. VITEMA is provided a copy of the list by the Department of
57 Human Services with phone numbers and email addresses to support sending out emergency
58 notice messages, as well as to VI Fire Emergency Medical Services to assist with Health &
59 Welfare checks by first responders following a disaster.

60 Most recently, Governor Albert Bryan, Jr. signed into law on 2 February 2023, from the 34th
61 Legislature, Bill No. 34-0265, which established the Office of Disability Integration within

62 VITEMA. The bill provides for two (2) staffed positions, one in each district, to serve as
63 Functional Disability Advisors, with close coordination from the Office of the ADA Coordinator,
64 both during times of disaster with access to funding provided under the Federal Stafford Act as
65 well as, under blue skies, for community outreach and planning advocates for preparedness.

66 Emergency Management Council

67 VITEMA is a first response coordinator with the principal mission to save lives and preserve
68 property of the Territory's population. More information on VITEMA mission and methods of
69 mission accomplishment can be found at our website www.vitema.vi.gov. The VI Code provides
70 explicit authority to the VITEMA Director in Title 10, Chapter 23, section 1005, to "resolve
71 interagency issues relating to emergencies or emergency management and shall utilize VITEMA
72 as the single territorial agency responsible to the Governor for administrative supervision of
73 emergency management activities under this chapter. He shall render periodic reports of those
74 activities to the Office of the Governor." To facilitate interagency coordination as well as
75 provide reports to the Office of the Governor, a monthly Emergency Management Council
76 (EMD) meeting is scheduled for the 3rd Thursday of each month for two hours, except for
77 December, when there is no meeting. Membership on the Emergency Management Council is
78 listed in the VI Code under Title 10, Chapter 23, section 1007. During the COVID-19 pandemic,
79 meetings were held via MS Teams. Currently the monthly meetings are held in-person, with
80 members choosing 1 of 3 Emergency Operations Centers (EOC) – St Croix, St Thomas, St John
81 – with EOCs linked together by VTC. Membership is currently at 72 different agencies,
82 including local governmental, federal, and private sector strategic partners. The meetings are
83 Chaired by the VITEMA Director with Co-Chairs being the three (3) Island Administrators from
84 St. Thomas, St. Croix, and St. John. During the meeting, updates on the status of Federal
85 Homeland Security Grants are also reviewed.

86 Emergency Management Accreditation Program

87 The US Virgin Islands uses National Incident Management System (NIMS) as its Emergency
88 Management System. Based on the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Federal
89 Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) doctrine, NIMS guides all levels of government,
90 nongovernmental organizations and the private sector to work together to prevent, protect
91 against, mitigate, respond to and recover from incidents. NIMS provides stakeholders across the

92 whole community with the shared vocabulary, systems, and processes to successfully deliver the
93 capabilities described in the National Preparedness System. NIMS defines operational systems
94 that guide how personnel work together during incidents. NIMS is also the foundation which
95 VITEMA has documented its plans, procedures, and process for compliance with the 2019
96 Emergency Management Accreditation Program (EMAP) Standard. The Emergency
97 Management Council serves as the EMAP Advisory Committee and provides coordinated input
98 by Emergency Management Program stakeholders in the preparation, implementation,
99 evaluation, and revision of the Emergency Management Program.

100 Emergency Support Functions

101 Under the Federal National Response Framework and designed to facilitate coordinated Federal
102 and Local response to a Stafford Act Major Disaster Declaration, VITEMA utilizes 15
103 Emergency Support Functions (ESF) with key VI Government Agencies assigned as leads. In
104 some cases, there are co-lead agencies. Each ESF has a preidentified lead and support agencies.
105 The VITEMA 2022 Territorial Emergency Operations Plan (TEOP), available on the VITEMA
106 website www.vitema.vi.gov, has more details on ESF responsibilities as well as specific hazard
107 response annexes for Active Shooter, Cyber Attack, Hurricanes, Earthquakes, Terrorism,
108 Tsunamis, and Human Pandemics. Additional plans supporting the Territorial Emergency
109 Management program include, Congregate Shelters maintained by the Department of Human
110 Services, Medical Special Needs Shelters maintained by the Department of Health, Debris
111 Removal maintained by the VI Waste Management Authority, Route Clearance maintained by
112 the Department of Public Works, Hazard Mitigation and Resiliency maintained by VITEMA
113 Hazard Mitigation, Recovery maintained by Office of Disaster Recovery, and Commodities
114 Distribution maintained by VITEMA Logistics.

115 Emergency Support Coordinators

116 When VITEMA activates its Emergency Operations Centers (EOC) either virtually or in-person,
117 each key agency is responsible for pre-identifying and sending individual representatives. As
118 defined under the VI Code Title 10, Chapter 23, section 1007, “each entity made a member of
119 the VITEMA Council shall designate an Emergency Services Coordinator (“ESC”) and notify
120 the Director of the person's name and telephone number. The person designated to serve as an
121 ESC may not be a person named or designated to serve on the VITEMA Council. The person

122 designated as an ESC shall be responsible to coordinate the respective entity's policies and
123 resources as required by VI Territorial Emergency Management Plan. The head of each entity on
124 the VITEMA Council shall give written authority to the ESC enabling that person to obtain and
125 provide the support specified in VI Territorial Emergency Management Plan and provide a copy
126 of said written authority to the Director.”

127 Local Emergency Planning Committee

128 Following participation in a virtual Town Hall meeting on 13 May 2021 including U.S.
129 Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), VITEMA, Department of Planning and Natural
130 Resources (DPNR), and the Department of Health (DOH), on community environmental health
131 concerns from Limetree Bay Refinery, GVI agencies (VITEMA, DOH, DPNR, VIFEMS, and
132 DOL-Division of Occupational Safety and Health) meet collectively with the EPA. The pupose
133 of the meeting was to discuss a recommended partnership between the GVI and Industrial Plant
134 Owners meeting Tier II requirements on annual reporting of hazard chemical storage. From the
135 meeting, a re-activation of the Local Emergency Planning Committee (LEPC) occurred. The
136 LEPC had been active when HOVENSA operated but became in-active following the 2012
137 closure of the plant. The re-activated LEPC meets every two-weeks and developed a new LEPC
138 Handbook in 2022. The VITEMA Director serves as the Chair and DPNR Commissioner serves
139 as the Deputy. In January 2022, the LEPC began outreach and informally invited St Croix
140 Industrial Plant businesses to the meetings. Port Hamilton Refinery and Transportation (PHRT)
141 has joined the meetings and hosted a meeting in October 2022. When, on 5 December 2022,
142 EPA entered into a legal agreement requiring PHRT to hire experts to safely remove chemicals
143 that are not being properly managed at the facility, the LEPC reached out to PHRT and
144 developed an even closer partnership. Meeting are now being schedule with PHRT, EPA and key
145 local agencies to include, VITEMA, DPNR, VIFEMS, DOH, DOL-VIDOSH, VIPD, VING, JFL
146 Hospital, and DHS. Currently, the EPA and PHRT have not reached agreement on the methods
147 and time line to remove the chemicals. As part of the preparation efforts, the LEPC is planning a
148 Tabletop exercise with all stakeholders as well as a media information campaign focused on
149 community awareness and education.

150 Hermon Hill Hazard Mitigation Capital Project

151 As part of the recovery projects following Hurricane Maria, VITEMA has a been awarded a
152 \$22.5 million FEMA Hazard & Mitigation Wind Retrofit and Safe Room project which is
153 currently at 30% architecture and engineering. While the project provides for relocation of the St.
154 Croix VITEMA Staff Offices, Emergency Operations Center and 9-1-1 Emergency
155 Communications Center, to include parking for 135 vehicles at Hermon Hill, it does not provide
156 any funding for furniture, fixtures, and equipment (FFE), permanent security fencing,
157 landscaping, or security cameras. VITEMA has submitted to Governor Bryan a request for fiscal
158 year 2024 supplemental funding for some of these items and will seek additional federal funding
159 for the others. Outside these funding challenges, VITEMA is the process to requesting a rezoning
160 of the Hermon Hill from R-3 to P. The initial public DPNR rezoning meeting has been
161 completed and recommendation sent to the President of the 35th Legislature in anticipation of a
162 rezoning committee hearing.

163 Caribe Wave Drill

164 VITEMA's motto is *Be Prepared, Stay Informed and Be Vigilant*. Besides Hurricanes, another of
165 our natural disaster risks is Tsunamis. Our next Territorial preparedness drill, scheduled for
166 Thursday, 16 March 2023, called Caribe Wave, is based on the scenario of a Tsunami impacting
167 the US Virgin Islands and will include sounding all 44-sirens and voluntary evacuation of
168 individuals to a safe elevation, 80-feet above sea level. Tsunamis are not unique to the Caribbean
169 and can bring terrible devastation, suffering and loss of life. Petra Nemcova, a survivor of the
170 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami in Thailand and official United Nations Disaster Risk Reduction
171 World Tsunami Awareness Advocate says, "We cannot stop natural disasters, but we can arm
172 ourselves with knowledge: so many lives wouldn't be lost if there was enough disaster
173 preparedness." Look for VITEMA announcements and media notices of how you too can
174 participate in Caribe Wave on 16 March.

175 Business Emergency Operations Center

176 VITEMA has furthered its preparedness efforts in 2023 by reaching out in cooperative spirit to
177 the private sector, who have now formed, in both districts, a Business Emergency Operations
178 Center (BEOC) through coordination with the Department of Licensing and Consumer Affairs
179 (DLCA). The BEOCs work in conjunction with VITEMA's Emergency Operations Centers. In
180 January 2023, VITEMA hosted on St Croix and St Thomas, a 2-day in-person, instructor

181 facilitated, FEMA Emergency Operations Center, Operations and Planning for All-Hazards
182 Course. Over 60 individuals from BEOCs and EOCs successfully completed the course.

183 Conclusion

184 VITEMA views emergency preparedness as a responsibility of every person, family, private
185 business, non-governmental and governmental agency. Together, we continue to be stronger than
186 ever and VI Strong. I want to thank Governor Albert Bryan, Jr. and Lieutenant Governor
187 Tregenza Roach for their continued leadership towards emergency preparedness, response
188 planning and holding agencies accountable. Finally, thank you, Senator Gittens, Committee
189 Chairman of the Committee on Homeland Security, Justice, and Public Safety, and other
190 committee members, for the opportunity to present an overview of the Virgin Islands Territorial
191 Emergency Management Agency relative to operations, initiatives, capital projects, staffing,
192 infrastructure, equipment, planning, challenges, and other related areas. My Staff and I are
193 prepared to answer any questions you may have at this time.