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# US Virgin Islands State of Readiness Hurricane Season 2023



PRESENTED BY  
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Submitted to

SENATOR KENNETH L. GITTENS, CHAIRMAN  
*Senate Committee on Homeland Security, Justice & Public Safety*  
Fritz E. Lawaetz Legislative Conference Room, St. Croix  
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3 Good afternoon, Senator Kenneth L. Gittens, Chairman, Committee on Homeland  
4 Security, Justice & Public Safety, other committee members, 35th Legislature  
5 Staff, and those in the viewing and listening audience.

6 I am Daryl D. Jaschen, Director of the Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency  
7 Management Agency (VITEMA). With me today are Department of Human  
8 Services Commissioner Kimberly Causey-Gomez; The Adjutant General of the  
9 Virgin Islands National Guard, Major General Kodjo Knox-Limbacker; Virgin  
10 Islands Police Department Assistant Commissioner, Mario Brooks; Virgin Islands  
11 Fire & Emergency Medical Services Assistant Director Antonio Stevens; and the  
12 American Red Cross of the US Virgin Islands Executive Director, Tina Beazor.  
13 We have been invited here today to provide this committee testimony on the US  
14 Virgin Islands state of readiness and other matters relating to the 2023 hurricane  
15 season. This written testimony is provided as a combined submission from  
16 VITEMA, Department of Human Services, the Virgin Islands National Guard, VI  
17 Fire and Emergency Medical Services, the Virgin Islands Police Department, and  
18 the U.S. Virgin Islands American Red Cross. The last time this Committee  
19 received testimony on U.S. Virgin Islands Hurricane Preparedness was October 14,  
20 2022 with Senator Angel L. Bolques, Jr. as Chairman.

### 21 Atlantic Hurricane Season 2023

22 The Atlantic Hurricane Season runs from 1 June through 30 November each year.  
23 Colorado State University (CSU) released the first prediction, on 14 April 2023, as  
24 a “slightly below-average Atlantic hurricane season in 2023, citing the likely  
25 development of El Nino as a primary factor”. The forecasts are based on statistical  
26 models utilizing 25-40 years of historical hurricane seasons and evaluate  
27 conditions including; Atlantic sea surface temperatures, sea level pressures,  
28 vertical wind shear levels, El Nino and other factors. Colorado State University is

29 predicting 13 named storms during the Atlantic hurricane season, of which six (6)  
30 become hurricanes and of those two (2) become major hurricanes, strength  
31 Category 3-4-5, with sustained winds of 111 miles per hours or greater. The CSU  
32 team issues forecast updates on June 1, July 6, and August 3. The National Oceanic  
33 and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) will issue its outlook for the 2023  
34 Atlantic hurricane season during an in-person news conference on Thursday, May  
35 25 at the NOAA Center for Weather and Climate Prediction in College Park,  
36 Maryland. Like CSU, NOAA releases an update hurricane forecasts in early  
37 August. The height of hurricane season runs from 15 August to 15 October.

#### 38 National Weather Service – Puerto Rico

39 VITEMA has no dedicated staff for weather forecasts but has developed a strong  
40 relationship with the National Weather Service in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

41 VITEMA works closely with the National Weather Service in Puerto Rico in  
42 providing weather forecasts during times of dangerous weather conditions for the  
43 US Virgin Islands. The National Weather Service operates 24 hours a day and is  
44 connected to the National Hurricane Center in weather analysis and forecasting  
45 products to include any Tropical Storm or Hurricane Watches or Warnings. The  
46 National Weather Service in Puerto Rico is also in close coordination with the US  
47 Coast Guard Sector San Juan to provide forecasts which are used to develop US  
48 Coast Guard Maritime Safety Information Bulletins (MSIBs) and identify times to  
49 close seaports in the US Virgin Islands, especially for the ferries running between  
50 St. Thomas and St. John.

#### 51 Hurricane Readiness 2023 Initiatives

52 The US Virgin Islands is conducting its Hurricane Capstone Exercise 2023, from  
53 Monday, 22 May (today) through Friday, 26 May, and concludes with a briefing

54 on Friday to Governor Albert Bryan, Jr. and FEMA Region 2 Deputy  
55 Administrator Andrew D'Amora by Government agency leaders responsible for  
56 hurricane focus initiatives.

57 There are a total of 15 hurricane focus area initiatives for 2023, with lead  
58 Government of the Virgin Islands agencies and FEMA developing evaluation  
59 criteria over the period from January to April, with May reserved for the Capstone  
60 Exercise. VITEMA and FEMA provide operational integration with territory  
61 Emergency Support Coordinators using the software application WebEOC, which  
62 joins representatives from all 15 Emergency Support Functions, at the emergency  
63 operations centers on St Croix, St Thomas and St John. The Public Assistance  
64 Office of VITEMA & Office of Disaster Assistance (ODR) develops and trains the  
65 means and methods of conducting Joint Preliminary Damage Assessment and the  
66 Department of Human Services conducts Individual Assistance - Preliminary  
67 Damage Assistance. The Department of Human Services continues to develop  
68 plans and identify key locations for congregate evacuation shelters as well as post-  
69 landfall secondary shelters. Figure 1 shows the listing of identified 2023 Hurricane  
70 Shelters.

Shelter Name As of: 1 May 2023	Shelter Type P=Primary S=Secondary M=Medical	Spaces (P=@20 sq ft) (S=@40 sq ft)	Generator Status G=Green A=Amber R=Red	Water Status W=WAPA C=Cistern	Comments
STX-D.C. Canegata	P	53 /27	G	C	Showers to be contracted
STX- Complex	P	739 /369	G	W & C	Showers Working
STX-CTEC	M		1=G / 1=R	W & C	Showers not required
STX-Arthur Richards	S	Rm1 = 250 / 125 Rm2 = 420 / 210	R	W	Showers to be contracted
STX- Mars Hill Head Start	S	224 /112	G	W	
WI –Community Center	S	53 /27	G	C	
STT-Lockart School	P	248 /124	G	W	Showers to be contracted
STT-Eudora Kean-Gym	P	460 /230	R	W	Showers to be contracted
STT- Eudora Kean-Cafeteria	P	161 /80	R	W	Showers to be contracted
STT-Sugar Estate	S	257 /128			
STT-Knud Hansen – Strive Center	S	96 /48			
STT-SRMC 3 <sup>rd</sup> Floor	M				
STJ-Adrian Senior Center	P	15 /8	G		
STJ-Giffit Hill School	P				DHS MOU Pending
STJ-Guy Benjamin	S	Rm1 = 22 /11 Rm2 = 31 /16	R	C	Showers to be contracted

71

72 **Figure 1: US Virgin Islands 2023 Hurricane Shelters**

73 A shelter preparation drill for all territory stakeholders will occur on Wednesday,  
74 24 May on St. Thomas at Eudora Kean High-School and on St. Croix at Complex  
75 High School. In addition to sheltering operations, the Department of Human  
76 Services, VITEMA, and the National Guard verifies Points of Distribution (PODs)  
77 sites for issuing food and water following a storm, and trains individuals, including  
78 volunteers, on managing a POD site.

79 Besides VITEMA and FEMA, other participants in the Capstone Exercise include,  
80 strategic Federal Partners such as the Army Corps of Engineers, Defense  
81 Coordinating Element, US Health and Human Services, the VI National Guard,  
82 and all key lead and support Territory Agencies.

### 83 National Hurricane Conference

84 VITEMA attended the 2023 National Hurricane Conference from 3-6 April in New  
85 Orleans, Louisiana. This conference averages over 1,500 attendees.

86 VITEMA Territorial Emergency Operations Plan

87 VITEMA’s Territory Emergency Operations Plan (TEOP) provides detailed  
88 responsibilities of lead territory agencies for all 15 Emergency Support Functions,  
89 incorporates the use of Community Lifelines in accessing and prioritizing response  
90 efforts, and identifies Essential Elements of Information (EEI). EEIs are used for  
91 coordinating response activities for Community Lifelines of Safety and Security;  
92 Food, Water, and Shelter; Health and Medical; Energy (Power & Fuel);  
93 Communications; Transportation; and Hazardous Materials.

94 National Hurricane Preparedness Week

95 VITEMA conducted outreach and messaging throughout the Territory as part of  
96 National Hurricane Preparedness Week from 30 April through 6 May. For the US  
97 Virgin Islands, the overall theme for the week for individuals, families, and  
98 businesses is “Be Prepared, Stay Informed, and Be Vigilant”. VITEMA and FEMA  
99 staff visited several radio talk radio shows in both districts, sent out a joint Press  
100 Release on Hurricane Preparedness, conducted social media campaigns with Public  
101 Service Announcements, and delivered 2023 Hurricane maps to gas stations and  
102 grocery stores.

103 One of the key major messages for the week, and a reminder from previous year’s  
104 preparedness activities, is that every individual and family needs to be prepared to  
105 be self-sufficient with food & water and other items deemed necessary for a period  
106 of up to 5-days following the impact of a Hurricane. Five (5) days is the length of  
107 time it will take the Government of the Virgin Islands to conduct lifesaving  
108 missions, assess damages, mitigate hazards, open routes, and prepare Points of  
109 Distribution with food and water to distribute to individuals living in damaged  
110 areas. Once areas are assessed, injured individuals transported to health care  
111 facilities, roads debris removed, and temporary emergency power established, the

112 Territory will begin critical infrastructure restoration to include ports,  
113 transportation hubs, power, telecommunications, banking / ATM operations,  
114 issuing D-SNAP cards, and food store restoration operations.

#### 115 Partners in Preparedness

116 Hurricane preparedness and outreach activities continued during the 51<sup>th</sup>  
117 Agriculture and Food Fair on St. Croix from 18-20 February with joint booths  
118 themed “Partners in Preparedness” with VITEMA, FEMA, Tropical Shipping, and  
119 O’Neals Transport. A drawing was held for two (2) new generators donated from  
120 Home Depot and Plaza Extra. VITEMA signed up an additional individuals for the  
121 Alert VI mass messaging notification service.

#### 122 Virgin Islands Police Department

123 The Virgin Islands Police Department (VIPD) under the leadership of  
124 Commissioner Ray Martinez is extremely experienced in preparing for and  
125 responding to Hurricanes in the Territory. VIPD is the lead agency for Emergency  
126 Support Function 13 – Public Safety & Security and coordinates the activity of  
127 stabilizing, along with our federal partners, the Community Lifeline of Safety &  
128 Security. One of the key activities which occurs immediately upon Governor  
129 Bryan signing a pre-landfall state of emergency is all territory government law  
130 enforcement agencies report to the Police Commissioner and are available for  
131 mission assignments. The National Guard can assist VIPD with either members of  
132 the full-time force or placing M-day members on State Active-Duty orders. Close  
133 coordination between VITEMA, Port Authority, and the US Coast Guard occurs to  
134 ensure Police and National Guard deploy to St. John prior to port closure. If  
135 needed following a disaster declaration, additional law enforcement is requested  
136 through EMAC to key partners, such as the NY Police. Upon establishment of a  
137 Curfew by Governor Bryan, VIPD establishes traffic control points to maintain

138 freedom of movement to key agencies such as Water & Power Authority and  
139 Department of Public Works while restricting traffic to unauthorized persons for  
140 safety purposes. VIPD maintains calls for service until the onset of Tropical Storm  
141 Force winds (39 mph) and then shelters in-place until the storm passes and  
142 sustained winds go below Tropical Storm Force levels.

### 143 Virgin Islands National Guard

144 The Adjutant General, Major General Kodjo Knox-Limbacker and his senior  
145 leaders of the Virgin Islands National Guard are attending, this week, the Army  
146 North Rehearsal of Concept (ROC) Drill at Fort Sam Houston, San Antonio,  
147 Texas. The ROC scenario focuses on the Department of Defense timeline to  
148 respond from 24 hrs. to 96 hrs. following landfall, exercising joint capabilities to  
149 support vital needs during two Category 4 hurricanes, and a Category 5 hurricane  
150 with multiple landfalls in Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands and then along the  
151 East Coast of the United States. The FEMA Defense Coordinating Elements from  
152 Region II and Region V are identified to support the US Virgin Islands in case of a  
153 single US Virgin Island only impact or a combination of USVI and Puerto Rico  
154 impact as in the case of Hurricane Maria in 2017. The Department of Defense's  
155 rapid response to the Territory in 2017 after Hurricane Irma, was primarily aided  
156 by a Naval Task Force already underway to respond to Hurricane Harvey making  
157 landfall in Texas on 26 August as a Cat 4 and then stalling for two days, dropping  
158 very heavy rains and flooding. One of the outcomes of last year's ROC, is that for  
159 the USVI and Puerto Rico region, expect a minimum of 96-hours (4-days) for  
160 Department of Defense response with Naval Assets.

161 Overall, the National Guard forces are prepared to conduct the following missions:

- 162 • Initial Response Teams on each island to assisted in route clearance and  
163 damage assessment



- 164 • Assist in Traffic Control Points with VI Police for curfew enforcement and  
165 danger areas
- 166 • Conduct Airport Opening assessment for Department of Defense aircraft
- 167 • Assist hospitals with patient Transportation & Evacuation, post landfall
- 168 • Transport and Operate Points of Distribution (Food, Water, Blue Tarps)
- 169 • Conduct congregate shelter COVID-19 screening, if needed, with guidance  
170 from DOH
- 171 • Establish emergency radio communications sites for forward operations and  
172 command centers
- 173 • Support Territory Emergency Operations Centers (STT, STX, STJ) with  
174 Liaison Officers (LNOs)
- 175 • Conduct Joint Reception Staging Onward Movement and Integration  
176 (JRSOI) for incoming and outgoing National Guard forces
- 177 • Provide the Dual Status Commander to command National Guard and  
178 Active-Duty Forces for mission assignments supporting the Territory  
179 response requirements

180 Two of the limitations of the Virgin Islands National Guard is 1) the lack of rotary  
181 wing aircraft and 2) the time required to transport National Guard forces from  
182 other states, to include activation under State Active-Duty Orders. There are also  
183 limited National Guard troop transportation vehicles and bed-down sites for the  
184 more than 900 National Guard Soldiers and Airmen needed to respond following a  
185 major hurricane impacting the Territory.

186 Virgin Islands Fire and Emergency Medical Services (VIFEMS)

187 The Virgin Islands Fire and Emergency Medical Services (VIFEMS) under the  
188 leadership of Director Daryl George is responsible for three (3) Essential Support  
189 Functions: ESF4- Fire Fighting, ESF9- Urban Search & Rescue, and ESF10-Oil  
190 and Hazardous Materials Response. VIFEMS works in close coordination with the  
191 Department of Planning and National Resources (DPNR) on Hazards Materials  
192 response. VITEMA’s 9-1-1 is the primary means for dispatching fire, rescue, and  
193 hazardous materials response units. During the onset of dangerous weather  
194 conditions VIFEMS will continue to respond to requests for assistance until the  
195 time identified for the arrival of Tropical Storm Force Winds – 39 miles per hour.  
196 After that time, calls will be held in cue by 9-1-1 and responders dispatched after  
197 the storm has passed and sustained winds returned below 39 miles per hour.  
198 VIFEMS also works in close coordination with the National Guard to house the  
199 pre-storm teams from the National Guard which provide immediate response with  
200 road clearance, emergency communications, and traffic control following the  
201 storm.

#### 202 US Virgin Islands American Red Cross

203 The US Virgin Islands American Red Cross under the leadership of Executive  
204 Director Tina Beazor, partners with the Department of Human Services in  
205 evaluating pre-storm evacuation shelters and assists the Department of Human  
206 Services in operating congregate shelters. The American Red Cross provides meals  
207 for shelter staff and individuals staying in shelters for the first three-days, once a  
208 shelter opens. Cots and blankets are provided following a storm for homeless  
209 individuals staying at the shelters. The Red Cross also has mobile teams traveling  
210 after a storm, throughout the community, to provide individual “cleanup kits” to  
211 assist in home recovery. A small warehouse in both districts is maintained which  
212 provides supplies for staff workers and individuals coming from outside the

213 Territory to assist following a disaster. Yesterday, May 21, the American Red  
214 Cross, VITEMA, FEMA, VIYA, and Tidal Basin Caribe hosted, on St Croix, at the  
215 University of the Virgin Islands, the US Virgin Islands All-Hazards Preparedness  
216 Expo focused on individual and family disaster preparedness. This is the first time  
217 in five (5) years that the Expo has been held.

#### 218 Emergency Communications – Amateur Radio Operators (Field Day Exercise)

219 While the Capstone exercise tests some levels of emergency communications, it  
220 does not incorporate any of the Territory’s amateur radio operators, who are all  
221 volunteers. Amateur Radio Operators or “Hams” as they are normally called, are  
222 licensed individually by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and  
223 while many supported VITEMA and FEMA during Irma and Maria, many are  
224 newly licensed and have not participated in a functional exercise or drill. From  
225 June 24 to June 25, on St Croix, a communications exercise is scheduled at the US  
226 Virgin Islands American Red Cross located near Sunny Isle. This “Field Day” as it  
227 is known, tests the team’s ability to operate for 24-hours, communicating using  
228 high-frequency radios and antennas, over long distances. Over 1,000 other teams  
229 are also conducting Field Day throughout North America during this same period.  
230 Throughout the Territory, every Monday evening at 8:00 pm, amateur radio  
231 operators from St. Croix, St. Thomas, St. John, and Water Island, gather to  
232 communicate over the air on the Amateur Radio Emergency Service (ARES) net.  
233 ARES consist of licensed amateur radio operators who are trained to provide radio  
234 communications services to civil and government agencies in times of emergency.

#### 235 Continuity of Operations (COOP) Plans

236 VITEMA recommends every business develop, train, and test its own Continuity  
237 of Operations Plan (COOP). In preparation for this hurricane season, in May for  
238 two-weeks, FEMA provided Technical Assistance to 15 Government Agencies on

239 preparation of plans specific to their needs. A two-hour COOP senior leader  
240 workshop is scheduled for Capstone Week.

#### 241 Private Sector Partnership

242 On May 7 and May 16, FEMA and the Department of Licensing and Consumer  
243 Affairs (DLCA) hosted a Private Sector Partnership tabletop exercise with  
244 representatives from both districts. The purpose of the exercise was to coordinate  
245 response and recovery activities with the private sector and focus Territory unity of  
246 effort in re-establishing critical infrastructure and supply chain structure. The  
247 group uses the Community Lifelines to set up teams and identify critical activities  
248 following a disaster.

#### 249 Senior Registry

250 Act No 8058 identifies the requirement for the Department of Human Services to  
251 maintain a voluntary Senior Registry for persons 60 years and older, living alone,  
252 or having disabilities. Currently there are 817 individuals listed in the registry and  
253 the Department of Human Services utilizes a mass messaging system to notify  
254 individuals for any storm related information and support following a disaster  
255 event.

#### 256 Closing

257 In closing, while Territorial agencies have worked both individually and within  
258 their Emergency Support Functions, there will always be more work ahead as we  
259 continue to improve our processes. Agencies should constantly refine and update  
260 their plans, conduct drills, educate new staff, and ensure our own families and  
261 agencies are prepared. We are very proud of each member in our Agencies and the  
262 seriousness in which they accept roles in not only preparing their agency but in  
263 preparing themselves and their families. We want to thank Governor Albert Bryan,

264 Jr. and Lieutenant Governor Tregenza Roach for the continued leadership,  
265 guidance, and emphasis on the importance of the Emergency Management Council  
266 and its efforts in continually improving our abilities to plan, train, and respond to  
267 any major disaster, whether there is advanced notice, such as a Hurricane or  
268 Pandemic or whether there is no or little notice, like an earthquake or tsunami.

269 Thank you, Committee Chairman, Senator Kenneth L Gittens, for this opportunity  
270 to provide a combined Testimony with VITEMA, Department of Human Services,  
271 the Virgin Islands National Guard, and the Virgin Islands Police Department, VI  
272 Fire and Emergency Medical Services, and the U.S. Virgin Islands American Red  
273 Cross. We are prepared to address any questions you may have at this time.