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US Virgin Islands State of Readiness Hurricane Season 2023 Update



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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 Staff,
5 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 is VITEMA Assistant Director
8 Steve M. DeBlasio, Sr. and we are providing an update on VITEMA's readiness
9 for Hurricane Season 2023.

10 This is the third time in less than 12-months that this committee has requested an
11 update on the State of Readiness for Hurricane Season from VITEMA and some of
12 our lead emergency support function (ESF) government agencies. I appreciate this
13 opportunity to discuss with you our State of Readiness, especially as this
14 committee hearing is set between the six-year anniversary of Category 5 Hurricane
15 Irma which impacted St John, St Thomas, and Water Island on 6 September 2017
16 and Category 5 Hurricane Maria which impacted St Croix, 14 days later on 20
17 September.

18 To quote our US Virgin Islands Delegate to Congress, Honorable Stacey E.
19 Plaskett from an article she wrote last year on the 5th year anniversary and
20 published in the Virgin Island Consortium on 20 September 2022, "For what
21 seemed like an unending day, Hurricane Irma relentlessly pummeled the territory,
22 and Virgin Islanders watched in mute shock as the Category 5 storm shredded
23 roofs, uprooted trees, and shattered lives. Then, exactly two weeks after Hurricane
24 Irma ripped through the U.S. Virgin Islands, Hurricane Maria made landfall. For
25 hours that stretched into the early morning, rain poured down in torrents across the
26 already battered islands, inundating vulnerable areas, and wrought destruction
27 across the parts of the islands that had not been shredded by Irma."

28 As a reminder to this committee, Hurricane Season for the Atlantic runs from 1
29 June through 30 November, or six months out of the year. Based on historical data
30 for the past 80 years, the height of Hurricane Season runs 15 August through 15
31 October and that is the time when 85% of the tropical cyclones form in the
32 Atlantic. The Peak of Hurricane Season, just past, which is 10 September. So far,
33 for the Territory this hurricane season there have been two credible threats which
34 have resulted in the deployment of the FEMA Incident Management Assistance
35 Teams (IMATs) to the US Virgin Islands with over 100 individuals each time; the
36 first time for Tropical Storm Bret and the second and most recent, for Category 5
37 Hurricane Lee. Both deployments were at the direction of the FEMA
38 Administrator and do not require a Territorial State of Emergency by Governor
39 Albert Bryan, Jr., nor do they come at any cost to the Virgin Islands Government.
40 VITEMA and FEMA use these deployments to conduct coordination activities and
41 test backup communications equipment, assess any changes in plans, conduct face-
42 to-face meetings between Territorial and Federal counterparts, as well as have fully
43 staff response teams on the ground prior to airports and seaports closing.

44 Besides these hurricane threat-based events, VITEMA also holds weekly,
45 Emergency Support Function 5 (Emergency Management) in-person meetings at
46 each of the VITEMA Emergency Operations Centers (EOCs) on St Thomas, St
47 Croix, and St John. Representatives from the Lead Territory Agencies for the 15-
48 Emergency Support Functions (ESFs) are in attendance as are several support
49 agencies, such as the American Red Cross and the Department of Education.
50 Recent topics of discussion at these meetings include the details on opening and
51 supporting congregate shelters, establishing Points of Distribution (POD) sites to
52 provide Food and Water beginning at landfall plus 5-days, and verifying the status
53 of critical governmental backup power generators.

54 Additionally, VITEMA continues to hold its monthly Emergency Management
55 Council Meetings on the third Thursday of each month. These 2-hour meetings are
56 for senior officials, chaired by the VITEMA Director, co-Chaired with our three
57 Island Administrators, and always have in attendance either Governor Albert
58 Bryan, Jr. or Chief-of-Staff Karl Knight. The importance of these meetings cannot
59 be underestimated as they host a series of All-Hazards updates as well as serving
60 as opportunities for senior level discussion, decision making and senior leader
61 guidance. Two good examples of the importance of these meetings are 1) when
62 WAPA indicated during an agency update the impact of Sargassum influx on the
63 reduction to the St Croix Seven Seas Reverse Osmosis Plant. Its output capacity
64 had been reduced to only a few days supply of potable water. Governor Bryan
65 immediately requested VITEMA and the Office of Legal Counsel to put together a
66 Territory Wide State of Emergency as well as develop a request for Federal
67 Disaster Emergency Assistance. This process which Governor Bryan initiated on
68 that Thursday, resulted in a Presidential approved Federal Disaster Declaration by
69 that following Monday, and FEMA staffing on the ground in St. Croix within one-
70 week. The second example occurred following an update on the status of shelters
71 and the lack of suitable government facilities on the Island of St. John. Following a
72 healthy discussion on possible options, Governor Bryan recommended that the
73 Department of Human Services and VITEMA reach out to the private sector and
74 possibly contract to reserve and if need, rent a facility to serve as a congregate
75 shelter.

76 As to the status of congregate shelters for this Hurricane Season. The Hurricane
77 Shelter Task Force began its assessment of shelters for all 4-islands in January
78 2023. Members of the Task Force include the Department of Human Services as
79 the Lead Agency under Emergency Support Function 6 (Mass Care, Emergency

80 Assistance, Housing, and Human Services), the American Red Cross, Department
81 of Health, VI Waste Management Authority, VI Police, VI National Guard, VI Fire
82 and Emergency Medical Services, Department of Education, Department of Sports,
83 Parks, and Recreations (for DC Canegata Community Center), and VITEMA. The
84 bottom line for our approved shelters is that all shelters in the Territory for
85 Hurricane Season 2023 are considered shelters of last resort. VITEMA and the
86 Department of Human Services strongly suggest that individuals should first look
87 to friends, neighbors, and faith-based organizations to shelter, as they will be more
88 comfortable and would mostly likely have more room than a congregate shelter.
89 However, if those options fall through, then please come to a named shelter as
90 soon as possible. Shelters are planned to open 24-hours prior to the onset of the
91 tropical storm force winds and will close within 24-hours following the passing of
92 the storm unless individuals remain homeless from storm damage.

93 Other Agencies which serve as leads for Emergency Support Functions include,
94 Department of Health, Bureau of Information Technology, Department of Property
95 and Procurement, VI Fire and Emergency Medical Services, Department of Public
96 Works, VI Waste Management Authority, VI Energy Office, Water and Power
97 Authority, Government House Joint Information Center, Department of
98 Agriculture, VI Police Department, and the Office of Disaster Recovery. The
99 Virgin Islands National Guard is not a lead agency but provides tremendous
100 support capability to many of the lead agencies following Governor Bryan signing
101 a Territory State of Emergency and placing Soldiers and Airmen on Territorial
102 Active-Duty Orders. The Department of Licensing and Consumer Affairs (DLCA)
103 is the lead Government Agency in coordinating with the Private Sector in actions
104 establishing a Business Emergency Operations Center (BEOC) after VITEMA
105 activates its EOCs.

106 As to VITEMA's personnel staffing, we just about have a full-complement of staff
107 in key positions for Operations, Logistics, Plans, Finance & Administration,
108 Human Resources, Grants, Hazard Mitigation, Public Assistance and Public
109 Information. VITEMA's new Assistant Director Steve M. Deblasio, Sr. accepted
110 his position and promotion from the VITEMA Logistics Deputy Director position
111 on 14 August and our newest member in a key position is Ms. Joanne Moorehead
112 as Public Information Officer beginning yesterday, 11 September. VITEMA has
113 also filled the position for the St. Thomas Emergency Operations Center
114 Supervisor and has a start date of 25 September. All the EOCs have operational
115 generators, emergency generator maintenance contracts, and both mobile
116 Emergency Operations Center are fully operational, to include their satellite
117 communications.

118 VITEMA has issued approximately 43 Hand-Held LMR radios to key agency
119 leaders who conduct weekly communications checks with BIT. There are 30-
120 satellite phones pre-designated for senior cabinet members located at the VITEMA
121 EOCs, to be issued upon credible threat to the territory, and finally there is both HF
122 and VHF radio communications stations setup and tested every two weeks at the
123 VITEMA EOCs on St. Thomas, St. Croix, and St. John. These HF and VHF
124 stations provided backup communications in case all other forms of
125 communications fail, such as occurred for several weeks on St. John after
126 Hurricane Irma in September 2017. Both 9-1-1 Emergency Communications
127 Centers have operational emergency power generators and BIT maintains radio
128 dispatch towers, to include refueling, in case of any long-term power outages.

129 Closing

130 In closing, while VITEMA has worked both individually as an agency to prepare
131 for this hurricane season in both districts, and with our Lead Emergency Support

132 Function agencies, there will always be more work ahead as we continue to
133 improve our processes. We must constantly refine and update our plans, conduct
134 drills, educate new staff, and ensure our own families are prepared, as we are
135 essential staff and are required to rise to the occasion each time when called. I am
136 very proud of each member of the VITEMA team and the seriousness in which
137 they accept roles in not only preparing our agency but in preparing themselves and
138 their families. I want to thank Governor Albert Bryan, Jr. and Lieutenant Governor
139 Tregenza Roach for the continued leadership, guidance, and emphasis on the
140 importance of the Emergency Management Council and its efforts in continually
141 improving our abilities to plan, train for , and respond to any major disaster,
142 whether there is advanced notice, such as a Hurricane or Pandemic or whether
143 there is little or no notice, like an earthquake or Tsunami.

144 Thank you, Committee Chairman, Senator Kenneth L. Gittens, for this opportunity
145 to provide Testimony on VITEMA's readiness for the 2023 Hurricane Season. We
146 are prepared to address any questions you may have at this time.