

**Committee on Housing, Transportation & Telecommunications
35th Legislature of the Virgin Islands
Sen. Marvin A. Blyden, Chairman**

February 27, 2023

Catholic Charities of the Virgin Islands, Inc.

**Testimony of Richard P. Bourne-Vanneck, Esq.,
Chairman, Board of Directors**

Good morning, Sen. Blyden, members of the Committee on Housing, Transportation & Telecommunications, members of the 35th Legislature of the Virgin Islands, staff, testifiers, and friends.

On behalf of Catholic Charities of the Virgin Islands, Inc. and its Board of Directors, it is a privilege to come today at your invitation to share with the Committee the story and perspective of Catholic Charities V.I. as a faith based non-profit agency dedicated to alleviate the conditions of poverty in our community; namely, hunger, clothing, medical care and most of all – homelessness. For over 50 years our mission statement has been the enhancement of human dignity. Our client population are the least fortunate in our community whom we endeavour to serve without regard, to race, religion, national origin or citizenship status.

In your invitation you asked for an update on housing issues that impact or are impacted by Catholic Charities of the Virgin Islands. Ordinarily, our Executive Director, Ms. Andrea Shillingford would be here with me to report to you the current and projected level of services delivered in the Virgin Islands by Catholic Charities in terms of three long standing areas: (1) individual meals at our soup kitchens and mobile outreach program, (2) nights of shelter, and (3) direct financial assistance, as well as to announce new services we are about to initiate to provide showers and laundry services for homeless persons reached through our mobile outreach division. However, Ms. Shillingford had to travel off-island on a family emergency and is unable to be with us this morning. In her stead I will try and detail for you some of the issues that impact the work of Catholic Charities in the Virgin Islands in these areas, as well the impact of Catholic Charities V.I. in those areas through our programs and services.

First, allow me to give a brief overview of the spectrum of homelessness as it relates to human dignity, and not merely material assistance.

Emergency Shelters

The starting point of the spectrum for addressing homelessness is the need for emergency shelter, often referred to as “homeless shelter”. By definition, emergency shelter is a crisis situation. We are talking of someone who has nowhere to go; nowhere to sleep. The person may be old or young, male, This apartment units at this facility will comprise a total of 40 beds with separate rooms or female, with or without minor children sharing a similar plight. These

are the people who we would see on the street, or in an abandoned vehicle, or squatting in an abandoned building. They are in an emergency situation – right then and there.

As you know, Catholic Charities, through its Bethlehem House Shelters operated emergency shelters on St. Thomas and St. Croix, until the impact of the hurricanes in 2017. Our St. Thomas Shelter in Hospital Ground was damaged but remained suitable for occupancy. That Shelter has been restored to full operational status. However, our St. Croix Shelter, located in a part of the Herbert Grigg Complex was destroyed.

We are pleased to report to this Committee that development is now underway for the Light of Christ Shelter for the Homeless, a new 40 bed facility in Frederiksted, St. Croix. We have received a Notice to Proceed with survey work from the Virgin Islands Housing Finance Authority administering Community Development Block Grant funding in the Territory to determine the specific boundaries for the land and existing buildings that were donated to Catholic Charities V.I. by the Roman Catholic Diocese under former Bishop Herbert Bevard. We are currently developing the architectural designs that will reconfigure and refurbish the existing buildings on the site and expect to issue an RFP for construction in the near future. CDBG funding has already been approved for \$230,000 of the total projected construction budget of \$871,000. God willing, we hope to have this new Shelter in operation by the beginning of 2024.

We are also pleased to report to this Committee that Catholic Charities, with the assistance and support of the Catholic Diocese, is now in the process of developing a new emergency shelter on St. John at Coral Bay. We have secured the land and are now preparing an application for CDBG funding to construct this much needed facility. There are some zoning issues affecting the Coral Bay site that need to be worked through, and we are optimistic that this project can move forward later this year.

Finally, we are well underway in the process of relocating the Bethlehem House facility to our nearby property in Hospital Ground. Catholic Charities has received architectural drawings to construct a new 12-unit emergency shelter facility in Hospital Ground. This facility is being designed with separate rooms that will provide a total of 40 beds over three facility wings, along with kitchen, common area and administration offices. We are optimistic that construction will begin later this year. The final architectural drawings are due April 20, 2021.

Two points should be noted: (1) emergency shelter, by definition, is temporary, and (2) our client population includes vulnerable persons and children, making it an inappropriate shelter for persons with severe mental health and/or substance abuse issues. As a result, we are unable to provide homeless shelter assistance many of the unsheltered people you and I see every day on our streets and park benches.

Transitional Housing

Next on the spectrum of homelessness is the need for transitional housing. Think of a person who came first needing emergency shelter, but who after 3-4 months has been assisted to find some employment and begun to establish stability in their life. This individual has made it past the need for emergency shelter assistance, and wants greater privacy and responsibility beyond dormitory type accommodations. Transitional housing shelter services provide this. The individual can begin to make some modest financial contribution to their shelter, which enhances self-worth and promotes human dignity. In this regard, we are pleased to report that since the last time we had the privilege of coming before this Committee we have commenced

operations at St. Theresa of Calcutta House of Hope in Christiansted, St. Croix. This transitional housing facility comprises 11 efficiency apartments (including a specially designed ADA unit) for male and female residents.

The relocation of our St. Thomas emergency shelter to a new facility does not mean abandonment of the existing Bethlem House site. Although the structures are close to the end of their useful life Catholic Charities plans to replace them with a new 12-unit transitional housing facility on the current site, similar to the new St. Theresa of Calcutta House of Hope in Christiansted.

Permanent Supportive Housing

The third point on the spectrum of addressing homelessness is permanent supportive housing. So, the person who has been in transitional housing has not got sufficient employment income stability to go to the next level and access housing in the affordable housing program or in the private market. In a permanent supportive housing program Catholic Charities (or a similar agency) interacts with private landlords and gives them assurances as to rent and security issues. This addresses legitimate landlord concerns and enables the individual to overcome the fact that they do not have references from where they last rented. It solves the circular problem of getting that first apartment in much the same way that Catholic Charities employment assistance program helps the individual get that first job by interacting with a potential employer. Catholic Charities V.I. previously administered a permanent supportive housing initiated by a prior administration using 100% local funding. The recent federal report, “*All In: The Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness*” released last December by the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, notes the importance of permanent supportive housing and calls for federal funding to create permanent supportive housing at state and local levels using the federal housing First program begun in 2014. Hopefully, this funding will materialize, and the Virgin Islands be able to access assistance to support permanent housing initiatives locally.

Affordable Housing

Finally, on the spectrum is the affordable housing program, which is largely the work of local and federal program assistance. This is the “success point” at which an individual would no longer be a case client at Catholic Charities. The individual can resume full participation in the housing market either through income eligibility lease or a subsidized mortgage.

Conclusion

At the beginning this morning I used the phrase “spectrum of homelessness” to describe what I consider to be a dynamic rather than rigid categorization. Based on what I have tried to detail this morning I suggest we rethink our terminology and use the term “unsheltered” as opposed to “homeless” because the scope of the problem extend far beyond the visible sign of a person sleeping on a park bench. The problem extends to persons squatting in abandoned structures, sleeping in cars, sleeping on someone’s couch, or temporarily using a friend or family member’s spare bedroom. The problem extends to persons who have no choice but to stay in unsafe situations. Simply put, the problem of unsheltered men, women and children in the Virgin Islands is like an iceberg: what you and I see is but the tip of a much larger problem beneath the surface.

The mission of Catholic Charities is not merely to provide food and shelter, although those are certainly the most visible and tangible elements. Our goal – consistent with a faith-based mission – is to provide material assistance and counselling to further the full restoration of human dignity. I am here today to tell you that we at Catholic Charities have seen individuals

here in the Virgin Islands come into our emergency shelters, unemployed and homeless, sometimes alone, sometimes with children. We have seen these same individuals go on to get jobs, move into transitional housing, and permanent supportive housing, and be fully independent today in affordable housing communities. That is the story we want to tell; that is the impact we want to have. That is about restoring a sense of self-worth; that is about the enhancement of human dignity for all God's children. That is the mission statement of Catholic Charities of the Virgin Islands.

Richard P. Bourne-Vanneck, Esq.