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Good day, Honorable Senator Marvin Blyden, Chairman of the 35th Legislature's Committee on Housing, Transportation, and Telecommunications. Committee Members, all members of the 35th Legislature, and the viewing and listening audience.

I am Erma Chase, Executive Director of The Methodist Training & Outreach Center d/b/a Meeting the Needs of the Community. We are a 501c3 nonprofit organization providing service to the community since 2001. Before I get into my testimony, I must share for the record that MTOC **is not** affiliated with the Methodist Church. MTOC's name came from the founding members and past board members of the organization being members of The Methodist Church. In an effort to **acknowledge** our identity, the current Board members of the organization voted to change the name in 2019 to Meeting the Needs of the Community.

The fight to end Homelessness is a community effort and will always be a constant uphill battle. It will take the entire community, including the Governor, Department of Human Services, Public Safety, Senators, Public/Private Sector, Behavioral Health, and community stakeholders that share interest to collaborate and find a solution to this problem. Each homeless case is unique. The common denominator is the hardship that comes with being homeless and it highlights the lack of resources within the community. The circumstances of homelessness could vary from mental issues, bad decisions, drug abuse, and economic hardships to name a few. The staff of MTOC knows this too well as our offices are located at the center of the Market Square on St. Thomas and Times Square on St. Croix, places frequented by the homeless population.

MTOC provides housing for Women, Men, and families through our programs; Supportive Services for Veteran and Families (SSVF), Housing Opportunity for Persons Living with HIV/AIDS (HOPWA), Transitional Housing for women and men and Permanent housing through our Single Room Occupancy. We are committed to assisting the clients in obtaining a safe clean place to call home. During the 2020-2021 year a total of 36 Veterans and their families were served through the SSVF program; 28 families for the HOPWA program; 5 for Transitional Housing and 8 for the Single Room Occupancy. To ensure all the needs of each client are met, we provide extensive case management, counseling, transportation to appointments, referrals, and weekly check-ins.

The agency's mailbox and telephone number are used as a point of contact for many of the homeless, not only enrolled clients of our programs. We continue to provide hot meals every third Thursday of the month. Through our monthly hot meals program, we provided over 12,000 meals and through the various programs we've assisted over 620 families.

Homeless Management Information System

The Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) is managed by MTOC under the Virgin Islands Continuum of Care on Homelessness (CoC) and the Collaborative Applicant, the Virgin Islands Housing Finance Authority. The HMIS system is designed to collect data to assist address the critical problems of homelessness within the territory through a coordinated community-based process of identifying needs and building a system of housing and services to address those needs.

Point-in-Time

The 2022 Point-in-Time was conducted on January 27 and January 28, 2023, and the data is currently being compiled and uploaded for distribution. Only 2 agencies participated in the 2022 Point-in-Time on St. Thomas, Meeting the Needs of the Community and Catholic Charities who were the lead agency for this event.

The HMIS system is the host for all HUD funded programs in the territory where all agencies are required to utilize the system for reporting to the Collaborative Agency, the Virgin Islands Housing Finance Authority.

Coronavirus Pandemic

During the Pandemic MTOC experienced an uptake in intakes and assessment due to families experiencing hardship due to layoffs. We were able to assist the clients through COVID funding through Community Foundation VI, Veteran clients needing assistance were serviced through the COVID funding received through the Supportive Services for Veteran family's program. Our offices in both districts served as an intake center for the Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP), managed by Virgin Islands Housing Finance Authority where we have processed over two hundred forty-two (242) families and continue to do so.

We were able to expand our outreach assistance by providing PPE, provide shelter to persons needing to quarantine, and to the homeless and less fortunate in our community. MTOC partnered with the Department of Health to provide monthly outreach providing COVID testing, COVID vaccinations and HIV testing in the Market square.

Community

As a community, we can do better in providing better service and assistance to both the homeless and mentally ill. The missing pieces are far more than the programs we currently have; more effort and funding are necessary to get the homeless off the streets and referred to the services that they need. These services include general health care, mental health care, counseling, general hygiene, a place to take a bath and get out of the elements are all necessary components that should be available for the homeless. MTOC Participated in a recent walk-thru in January of the downtown area of the Market Square and the lower Savan area, organized in conjunction with Public Safety that unveiled an in-depth view of the homeless population that seems to have shifted since the Irma/Maria hurricanes. Help us to help the community, help us to bring regulation to one area at a time. MTOC has the vision, the template to a great program, and most importantly a willing/capable staff to conduct this mission. We need your help to Meet the Needs of the Community.

On the journey to provide programs that will help us to reach the goal of providing services that will meet the unmet needs of our housing programs within the territory, MTOC proposes to create a Day shelter, providing, hot meals, showers, and clothing during the day and providing emergency shelter for the homeless and/ or at-risk individuals. This will be the first in the St. Thomas/St. John District. This project will allow us to provide 7 emergency beds to a lacking inventory. These funds are being sought through Virgin Islands Housing Finance Authority CDBG-DR.

MTOC has submitted to the V.I H. A. for funding through the Department of Human Services to assist in the operation of the Day Shelter program. The approval of this grant in whole or part will aid us in fulfilling the need to operate a program that is well desired for our community.

Upcoming

Our mission is to **Meet the Needs of Our Community** through service while bridging the gaps to a community and population in need. Bridging the gap to an area that has gone unmet due to the loss of VICARE and HOPE, INC. MTOC has partnered with the Department of Health as a subgrantee in the fight against HIV and bringing an end to the epidemic. We've once again realized that it's not only left to the Department of Health but all stakeholders in the community. The following captioned notes are also submitted for your information and guidance.

Gaps in services

The biggest gap in services is housing, there is absolutely nowhere to accommodate the needs of the qualifying Population. Showers and toilet access will fill a necessary void among the population as well. Medical and mental health resources are also a great need. While drug use is prevalent among the population, many suffer from medical/mental health issues unaddressed for many years.

MTOC can speak to the population within the Market Square area where they congregate/loiter in the historical bungalow on a daily basis. The bungalow was once the place where local vendors sold their home grown produce. The area is washed each Friday morning in hopes of it remaining clean for the vendors on Saturday. By the end of the day /overnight the area is unsightly once again. The Market Square clientele consists of both alcohol/drug abusers and medical/mental health issues. We provide them with toiletries, food, water, and clothing. MTOC assists in some manner approximately seventy-five (75) additional people of the area's population with the unfunded services that we provide. This does not include the clients already enrolled in the federally funded programs (HOPWA/SSVF/Transitional/HMIS) programs.

Many of our walk-in clientele request housing more than ever since the hurricanes (Irma/Maria) and the COVID Pandemic which caused many to be without jobs. Others come for the use of the telephone service, food due to hunger, toiletries for hygiene, a drink of water, or the use of our address in order to receive mail due to the homeless situation. Grants provide the service without consideration of a venue to provide said service. The majority of the clients are without transportation and oftentimes the areas where we can house them are not within walking distance.

Priority Needs

Most programs are income-based and requires Veteran, HIV/AIDS or homeless status.

Verification is also required – photo ID birth certificate, SS card and proof of income.

Oftentimes our clientele has no identification for verification. Without a valid ID they cannot request a new social security number, birth certificate or driver's license. The stigma and confidentiality issues also prevent clients from applying to the program.

Unmet Needs

Emergency **shelter** is our biggest concern – people needing assistance going through a transfer waiting on housing vouchers, domestic violence, fire damaged homes or family/landlord evictions.

Lack of accessible health and mental health services, adequate counseling

None of the grants provide room for acquisition, or rentals. A grant for the purchase of portable showers and toilets was recently turned down due to the lack of a venue; it did not provide finding or approval for purchase or rental of a building.

Local housing market

The local market is currently serving ABNB clientele and the FMR is no longer effective. The bigger hotels have remained closed since the 2017 hurricanes (Irma/Maria) and most recently the COVID Pandemic. Our programs are HUD regulated and must work within the current FMR. The damaging issues over the years of renting to Section 8 families leave a very thin market for our clientele, as well. Affordable rentals are limited and those that are available are very restrictive, and located on the outskirts where there are no bus lines or public transportation in the areas.

Challenges/Barriers are as follows:

- Transportation limited or non-existent.

- Lack of affordable rental housing units

- Sub-standard housing\All of the above are challenges the clients frequently encounter on the road to Success.

Data Collection

All information collected for each client is uploaded to the HMIS system at MTOC. This is a requirement for all agencies involved in homeless assistance and supportive services. All applications include the relevant/pertinent information needed for upload.

Suggestions

Provide medical/mental health assistance including counseling.

Provide a safe house for overnight and day service.

Provide an outlet for distributing donated clothing, toiletry, water, and food distribution (even if its limited)

A “One Stop Shop” will be an ideal concept for the territory. Great consideration must be given to how it operates, the pros and cons of operating and sustaining such an operation. DOH/DHS/PS must all be involved and of one accord.

Provide an emergency division to assist persons who have no form of identification to complete applications when attempting to qualify for the programs.

All agencies should make a conscious effort to utilize the HMIS system in order for the territory to provide statistics when necessary. Greater funding can be provided once the data is there to substantiate the need.

Update and expand confidentiality procedures to avoid unintentional disclosure.

Many of our clients in the programs come from abroad, they are sold on coming to the islands due to all year sunny weather. Many of them are very familiar with the programs and take advantage because they know their rights; this is very prevalent among the veterans.

It is my hope that the above information provides you with an insight on our programs and the needs of the homeless, less fortunate community.

Lastly, I would like to publicly thank my staff for their diligence and challenging work during the COVID-19 pandemic putting themselves at risk to help the homeless community as well as our Board of Directors, members, and volunteers.

To you Honorable Senator Blyden, I thank you for allowing me to submit this written testimony.

Submitted by: Erma Chase, Executive Director
Meeting the Needs of the Community