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Committee on Culture, Youth, Aging, Sports, and Parks

COMMISSIONER

AVERIL E. GEORGE

US. VIRGIN ISLANDS DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES



Testimony of Commissioner George Department of Human Services Legislative Hearing on Youth and Elderly Programs in St. John February 21, 2025

Good morning, Chairman Senator Angel Bolques, Jr; members of the Committee on Culture, Youth, Aging, Sports, and Parks, distinguished colleagues, and the viewing and listening audience:

My name is Averil George, Commissioner of The U. S. Virgin Islands Department of Human Services and I am honored to be here today alongside Assistant Commissioners Carla Benjamin and Taetia Phillips-Dorsett, Deputy Commissioner Sean Georges, and Program Administrators and Managers from the Department of Human Services (DHS) who are here to offer support via Teams. We are grateful today for this opportunity to provide an in-depth overview of the essential youth and elderly programs that serve the residents of St. John.

As the designated State Agency, the Virgin Islands Department of Human Services is mandated to administer programs that serve youth, children, individuals with disabilities, the elderly, and low-income adults and families. DHS provides a continuum of services across the lifespan, from infancy through old age, through various divisions operating throughout the territory.

Today, my testimony will focus on the critical youth and aging programs available in the territory, highlighting their impact and accessibility for residents of St. John.

YOUTH SERVICES ON ST. JOHN

Office of Child Care and Regulatory Services (OCCRS)

The Office of Child Care and Regulatory Services (OCCRS) administers a fully federally funded childcare assistance program, providing subsidies to qualifying low-income families for early childhood education and care. This includes care for children from infancy through 12 years old, as well as assistance for after-school programs, summer programs, and nontraditional hours care. The subsidies are made available through the federal Office of Child Care's Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) and are extended to caretakers who work or participate in training for at least 30 hours per week, provided they meet income and household size eligibility guidelines.

When it comes to services on St. John, OCCRS ensures that eligible families have access to childcare subsidies for both formal and informal care arrangements. While St. John historically has a smaller number of children and families receiving CCDF assistance compared to St. Thomas and St. Croix, the program remains fully available to those who qualify.

Office of Head Start (OHS)

The Head Start Program plays a fundamental role in early childhood education, providing comprehensive services to children aged three to five from low-income families. Head Start

promotes school readiness through high-quality education, health, nutrition, and disability services, ensuring that children enter kindergarten prepared to learn. Additionally, 10 percent of Head Start enrollment is designated for children with special needs, ensuring equitable access to services for all eligible children.

On St. John, the Cruz Bay Head Start is a cornerstone of our youth programming. This facility, which will serve 20 children, was recently reconstructed. The completion of this state-of-the-art learning center features a modernized classroom, kitchen, and playground. The ribbon-cutting ceremony on November 6, 2024, marked a major milestone in our investment in early childhood education. The Cruz Bay Head Start is part of a broader infrastructure initiative, with over \$42 million invested across the territory to establish safe, modern educational environments for our youngest learners.

On St. John, DHS is now actively engaged in recruitment and enrollment efforts for the 2025-2026 school year. We are ready to welcome students into a safe and nurturing learning environment. Additionally, to ensure that the program operates effectively, we are seeking passionate individuals to join our team. We are in critical need of **food service workers, Head Start preschool teachers, and preschool teacher assistants.**

If you are looking for a meaningful career that makes a lasting impact on the lives of young children in the Virgin Islands, now is the time to apply. We invite dedicated professionals who share our commitment to early childhood education to become a part of this vital program.

Child Welfare Services

Through a continuum of care and compassion, DHS provides critical services to ensure safety, permanency and overall well-being for children who may be at risk of maltreatment or on the cusp of entering the juvenile justice system. Services are provided from birth to age 18, with extended foster care and support available up to the age of 23 for eligible youth.

- **Office of Intake and Emergency Services (OIES):** Intake services are the first responders for reports of child maltreatment. These services operate 24/7, ensuring immediate intervention when abuse or neglect is suspected as well as assistance in securing placements when protective services are necessary. On St. John, residents have access to these emergency services, ensuring that no child in need is left without protection.
- **Division of Children and Family Services (DCFS):** DCFS provides in-home interventions designed to reduce the risk of child maltreatment and family separation. The division also provides out-of-home care when family separation is necessary. DCFS manages foster care and adoption services, including the recruitment, training and retention of foster and adoptive parents. In St. John specifically, families and children in need of these services receive case management, intervention support and services to facilitate safe family reunification, when possible, in collaboration with the courts. DHS is actively working to increase the availability of foster and adoptive families to serve the St. John community.
- **Division of Intervention and Prevention Services (DIPS):** This division administers intervention and prevention programs for youth at-risk for and those already involved in the juvenile justice system. Services such as case management, counselling and

support services through collaborative community partnerships are available to this population of youth across the territory, including in the St. John community.

- **Office of Residential and Interstate Compact Affairs (ORICA):** ORICA oversees the placement and monitoring of individuals in residential facilities and administers interjurisdictional agreements for the placement of children (ICPC) and juveniles (ICJ). On St. John, ORICA plays a key role in ensuring that residents who require specialized residential care receive appropriate placement and oversight.

SENIOR PROGRAMS ON ST. JOHN

Division of Senior Citizen Affairs (SCA)

The Division of Senior Citizen Affairs administers multiple programs that support the elderly community throughout the Virgin Islands. Today, I will highlight the programs that directly impact St. John.

- **Socio-Recreational Program:** This program fosters social engagement and recreational opportunities to promote seniors' well-being. On St. John, seniors participate in activities such as luncheons, arts and crafts, and wellness programs at the Adrian Senior Center and St. Ursula's Senior Center. Currently, 24 seniors are enrolled, benefiting from these structured activities that contribute to their overall quality of life. DHS's Adrian Center itself serves **15 to 18 seniors daily**. The center not only provides opportunities for engagement but also serves as a place where seniors can enjoy nutritious meals and a supportive community environment. **In addition to its role as a senior center, the Adrian Senior Center also serves as St. John's designated hurricane evacuation shelter.** The facility has a capacity of up to 15 individuals and is equipped to accommodate wheelchair users and individuals with service animals

Through these programs and emergency preparedness efforts, DHS continues to ensure that seniors on St. John have access to spaces where they can remain active, socially connected, and safe during times of crisis.

- **Homemaker Services Program:** This program provides in-home assistance for elderly, frail, or disabled individuals, helping them with personal care, light housekeeping, and daily living activities. In St. John specifically, DHS ensures that eligible seniors receive these vital services, though demand remains high.
- **Senior Community Services Employment Program (SCSEP):** SCSEP offers part-time employment and job training for seniors aged 55 and older, helping them remain active in the workforce. When it comes to St. John, eligible seniors have access to this program, allowing them to contribute meaningfully to their community while earning
- **Information and Referrals (I&R):** The I&R program provides up-to-date information to Senior Citizens on the services available to them in the community and connects them with the help that they need. This program also provides Senior ID cards to individuals 60 and older. **St. John Specifics:** I&R services are accessible to seniors in St. John,

offering a point of contact for information and connection to services. St. John seniors can obtain Senior ID cards through this program.

- **State Pharmaceutical Assistance Program (SPAP):** The Pharmaceutical Assistance Program is designed to provide financial assistance to seniors whose income is less than or equal to \$18,000.00 for a single person or \$30,000.00 for a couple, to assist with prescription drug needs. A co-pay is required for each prescription at time of purchase. To be eligible for SPAP, an individual must be 60 years of age or older and must be a VI resident for at least 6 months. Proof of age, residency, medical status and income are required with the application.
- **Elderly Nutrition Program (Meals on Wheels):** This program provides nutritionally balanced meals to homebound seniors. Meals are also available at congregate sites such as the Adrian Senior Center. Commonly known as Meals on Wheels, this program provides nutritionally balanced meals five to seven days a week to individuals aged 60 and older, as well as disabled persons under the age of 60. Meals are also available at congregate sites, including the Strive Center, Richmond Center, and the Adrian Senior Center. ***When it comes to services on St. John,*** the Elderly Nutrition Program/Meals on Wheels remains a crucial resource for the senior community. The Adrian Senior Center serves between 15 congregate meals per day, ensuring that seniors have access to nutritious meals in a welcoming, social environment. Additionally, the Meals on Wheels program delivers meals to 35 homebound clients in St. John, supporting those who are unable to attend congregate meal sites. Currently, there are six individuals are currently awaiting placement for congregate meals in St. John.
- **Adult Protective Services (APS):** APS investigates and intervenes in cases of elder abuse, neglect, or exploitation. Residents of St. John who require APS services receive the same level of protection and response as seniors on other islands.

NEW DHS OFFICES IN CRUZ BAY ST. JOHN MULTIPURPOSE CENTER

For many years, residents of St. John have faced challenges in accessing critical services from the Department of Human Services, often requiring costly and time-consuming travel to St. Thomas. Recognizing this long-standing need, DHS is exceptionally pleased to announce the opening of new, conveniently located offices in the newly renovated Cruz Bay St. John Multipurpose Center.

These dedicated offices are staffed and equipped to provide essential DHS services directly to the residents of St. John, eliminating the burden of inter-island travel for assistance. The establishment of these offices represents a significant step forward in ensuring equitable access to vital human services for the St. John community. This investment underscores DHS's unwavering commitment to meeting the needs of all Virgin Islanders by making crucial services more convenient, accessible, and readily available right here in St. John.

To ensure that residents are well-informed about the availability of services, DHS has launched a media campaign, including a radio advertisement, to publicize the operational hours of our various divisions throughout the week. This initiative is aimed at increasing awareness and ensuring that individuals can access the services they need in a timely and convenient manner.

The following services are available at the Cruz Bay St. John Multipurpose Center during the listed hours:

- **SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program):** Monday, Wednesday, Friday, 8:30 AM – 12:30 PM
- **MAP (Medicaid Assistance Program):** Monday, Wednesday, Friday, 1:30 PM – 4:30 PM
- **TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families):** Friday, 8:30 AM – 12:30 PM
- **Senior IDs / SCCEP (Senior Community Service Employment Program):** Thursday, 9:00 AM – 2:00 PM
- **Vocational Rehabilitation (Voc Rehab):** Thursday, 9:00 AM – 2:00 PM
- **Head Start Administrative Services:** Tuesday, 9:00 AM – 2:00 PM
- **OCCRS (Office of Child Care and Regulatory Services):** Tuesday, 9:00 AM – 2:00 PM

CONCLUSION

For far too long, St. John has been overlooked when it comes to the equitable distribution of critical services. As the smallest of the three main Virgin Islands, it has endured unique challenges that have made it significantly more difficult for residents—particularly our youth and seniors—to access the support they need.

It is deeply troubling that for years, children, working parents, the elderly, and individuals with disabilities have been forced to navigate the added burden of traveling by ferry to another island just to obtain essential services that should be readily available in their own community.

This is not just an inconvenience; it is an unacceptable disparity that has placed undue strain on St. Johnians, and it must be addressed with urgency and commitment.

The Department of Human Services recognizes the hardship this has created for our most vulnerable residents, and we are resolute in our mission to bring true parity to St. John. We are working to expand the presence of vital programs and ensure that residents on St. John no longer have to endure the frustrations of traveling simply to receive the same services that their fellow Virgin Islanders can access with ease.

The opening of our new DHS offices in Cruz Bay is just one step in a broader effort to correct this imbalance. Additionally, the construction of the brand-new, state-of-the-art Cruz Bay Head Start facility represents a historic investment in early childhood education on St. John—one that provides children with the modern, high-quality learning environment they deserve. This is not just a building; it is a symbol of our unwavering commitment to ensuring that St. John's youngest learners have the same foundation for success as children throughout the territory.

Our commitment is clear: St. John deserves the same level of attention, resources, and respect as the rest of the territory. We will not waiver in our pursuit of fairness, and we will not rest until the people of St. John has full and equal access to the services they deserve.

Thank you, and I am now available to answer any questions you may have.