



**THE
DEPARTMENT
OF HUMAN
SERVICES**

**Committee on
Disaster Recovery,
Infrastructure, and
Planning**

Tuesday, June 30, 2026
SENATOR MARISE C, JAMES, ESQ.
CHAIR



**Testimony of Assistant Commissioner Carla Benjamin
Committee on Disaster Recovery, Infrastructure, and Planning
June 30, 2026, 10:00 AM**

Good Morning Madam Chairwoman, Marise C, James, members of the Committee on Disaster Recovery, Infrastructure, and Planning, fellow Agency leaders and staff, and the viewing and listening public. My name is Carla Benjamin, Assistant Commissioner of the **Virgin Islands Department of Human Services (VIDHS)**. Joining me today is our Lead Coordinator for Emergency Support Function #6 (**ESF #6**), Yvette Henry.

Under the Territorial Emergency Operations Plan (TEOP), VIDHS leads Emergency Support Function #6, spearheading Mass Care, Emergency Assistance, Points of Distribution (PODs), and Human Services. Very closely aligned are the Department's Lifeline responsibilities: Food, Shelter and Hydration, with the other key responsibility of the Department being the Senior Disabled Disaster Registry. The Department approaches the 2026 hurricane season focused on protecting our territory's most vulnerable residents through strong partnerships.

I. Mass Care Logistics & The 72-Hour Food Matrix

Mass Care involves but is not limited to sheltering, feeding, services coordination for the general population and donations coordination with the support of all ESF #6 entities. Since the beginning of calendar year 2026, the ESF #6 partners have visited, inspected and vetted numerous locations across the territory to identify appropriate, accessible sites that meet fire, health and American Red Cross standards to serve as emergency shelters. The list of selected sites will be presented later in this testimony.

To ensure reliable food and hydration distribution, our ESF #6 teams utilize a strict 72-hour transition matrix with federal and local partners:

- **Pre-Staged Resources:** FEMA has positioned 222,000 shelf-stable meals and 454,000 liters of water on St. Croix, alongside 30,000 meals and 34,000 liters of water on St. John.
- **The 72-Hour ARC Pivot:** Together with The American Red Cross, our teams manage all resident feeding operations inside designated shelters during the critical initial 72 hours post-impact using their own pre-staged inventories.
- **Day 4 VIDE Transition:** On Day 4, the Department of Education (VIDE) assumes territory-wide feeding utilizing industrial kitchens at Julius Sprauve on St. John, Bertha C. Boschulte Middle School on St. Thomas, and the Educational Complex on St. Croix.

To prevent dehydration among elderly and medically fragile residents, VIDHS takes direct responsibility for pre-staging local bottled water at every designated shelter. Beyond shelters, our teams are prepared to activate localized neighborhood PODs to distribute supplies. Following a federal disaster declaration, VIDHS stands ready to launch Disaster SNAP (D-SNAP) to quickly provide electronic food benefits to residents facing severe food or income loss.

II. 2026 Shelter Capacities and Physical Status

Before a hurricane makes landfall, congregate shelter space is calculated at 20 square feet per person to maximize immediate safety. After landfall, safety regulations require doubling that space to 40 square feet per person for longer-term stays, cutting total capacity from **2,209 available slots pre-landfall down to 1,136 slots post-landfall**.

- **St. John:** The Adrian Senior Center provides 27 pre-landfall and 13 post-landfall slots. The Head Start Cruz Bay Community Hub provides 49 pre-landfall and 24 post-landfall slots. Pet sheltering is not available at either of these locations, and the Julius Sprauve Kitchen is designated strictly to provide food for shelters.
- **St. Thomas:** The Ivanna Eudora Kean High School Gym offers 543 pre-landfall and 271 post-landfall slots, with no pet sheltering available. The Bertha C. Boschulte (BCB) Middle School Gym offers 360 pre-landfall and 180 post-landfall slots, while the Lockhart K-8 facility provides 248 pre-landfall and 124 post-landfall slots. Both the BCB Gym and the Lockhart facility serve as district pet shelters equipped to accommodate 60 cats and 30 dogs each, while the BCB Kitchen is designated to provide food for shelters.
- **St. Croix:** The St. Croix Educational Complex serves as the largest capacity resource with 738 pre-landfall and 369 post-landfall slots and accommodates co-located pet sheltering for 60 cats and 30 dogs. The D.C. Canegata Recreation Center provides 191 pre-landfall and 96 post-landfall slots. The Beeston Hill Gym provides 32 post-landfall slots, and pet sheltering is not available at either Canegata or Beeston Hill.
- **Water Island:** The Fire House provides 53 pre-landfall and 27 post-landfall slots, strictly reserved for post-storm emergencies.
- **Pet Sheltering:** Territory-wide pet sheltering capacity has expanded. All pet shelter sites are co-located with general shelters, but pets and humans will utilize separate spaces. On St. Thomas, both the Lockhart K-8 facility and the Bertha C. Boschulte (BCB) Middle School Gym are equipped to accommodate 60 cats and 30 dogs each. On St. Croix, the St. Croix Educational Complex can provide pet sheltering for 60 cats and 30 dogs. Currently, pet sheltering is not available on St. John.

ISLAND	LOCATION	MAX. CAPACITY PRE STORM	MAX. CAPACITY POST STORM	PET SHELTER
St. John	Adrian Senior Center	27	13	NO
	Cruz Bay Head Start Community Hub	49	24	NO
	Julius Sprauve Kitchen	Provide Food	For Shelters	N/A
St. Thomas	IEKHS – Gym Only	543	271	NO
	BCB – Gym	360	180	60cats/30dogs
	BCB – Kitchen	Provide Food	For Shelters	N/A
	Lockhart K-8	248	124	60cats/30dogs
Water Island	Fire House	-	27	No

St. Croix	Educational Complex	738	369	60cats/30dogs
	D.C. Canegata	191	96	NO
	Beeston Hill Gym	-	32	NO

III. Modernizing Vulnerable Population Support

Reflecting the realities tested during the June 2026 Capstone Exercises, the DHS ESF #6 team is advancing targeted, data-driven initiatives to activate real-time protection for our most vulnerable neighbors:

- 1. Energy Backup Battery Program:** In partnership with the V.I. Energy Office, Government House, and the Office of Medicaid, we are actively updating our internal workflows to identify vulnerable residents. We are now leveraging our intake data through the Patient Unified Lookup System for Emergencies (**PULSE**) alongside our Senior Disabled Disaster Registry to seamlessly add eligible individuals utilizing assistive devices to this critical power backup initiative.
- 2. The Elder, Dependent, Adult and Disabled Persons Disaster Registry** was established under **Act 8085** to ensure proactive tracking, targeted solutions, and direct safety protocols for vulnerable, technology-dependent, and medically fragile residents during emergency operations. Currently, there are **954 individuals actively enrolled** on the territory-wide registry, with the specific breakdown of individuals by island as follows:
 - ❖ **St. Thomas (STT):** 543 individuals
 - ❖ **St. Croix (STX):** 313 individuals
 - ❖ **St. John (STJ):** 100 individuals
- 3. Continuous Training Realignment:** ESF #6 has reinstated bi-weekly training meetings for Emergency Support Coordinators, shelter managers, and POD supervisors, while partnering with the American Red Cross for intensive, in-house shelter operations training.

Conclusion

The Department of Human Services extend our sincere thanks to our partners at VITEMA, FEMA, the Virgin Islands National Guard, the Department of Education, the American Red Cross, VIPD, our Emergency Support Function Agency partners, and our dedicated volunteer organizations for their ongoing collaboration.

Thank you, Chairwoman James, for allowing us the opportunity to testify. We are happy to respond to any questions you or the committee members may have.