



**TESTIMONY
TO THE
COMMITTEE ON HOUSING, TRANSPORTATION AND TELECOMMUNICATIONS
36TH LEGISLATURE
OF THE
VIRGIN ISLANDS**

BY

CATHOLIC CHARITIES OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 11, 2026

EARLE B. OTTLEY LEGISLATIVE HALL

ST. THOMAS, VIRGIN ISLANDS

Good morning, Honorable Senator Blyden; Members of the Committee on Housing, Transportation and Telecommunications; members of the 36th Legislature of the United States Virgin Islands; staff; fellow testifiers; and members of the public.

My name is Sandra Thomas Mason, the Assistant to the Executive Director of Catholic Charities of the Virgin Islands, an agency of the Roman Catholic Diocese of the Virgin Islands. On behalf of Andrea Shillingford the Executive Director, I will be presenting testimony today.

Again, my name is Sandra Thomas Mason, thank you for the invitation to appear before you today to provide a comprehensive briefing on homelessness and housing instability in the Territory, and to share Catholic Charities' operational perspective during this period of increasing demand, fiscal uncertainty, and evolving federal policy.

Homelessness in the Virgin Islands is not a single condition; it exists on a continuum of instability. Through our daily work, we see individuals who are chronically unsheltered, individuals who cycle repeatedly through emergency shelters, families and seniors who are couch surfing, and people who are one unexpected expense away from losing housing entirely.

Housing instability is being driven by several interrelated factors:

- A shortage of affordable and accessible housing units
- Rising rents and fixed or declining incomes
- Loss or reduction of government assistance
- Chronic health and behavioral health needs
- Lack of appropriate placements for seniors and medically fragile individuals

We also continue to see elderly individuals remaining in emergency shelters or hospitals because there are no appropriate long-term care or supportive housing options available. These are not isolated cases, they represent system gaps that require coordinated solutions.

Every person experiencing homelessness lives a unique situation with a unique story. Because of this, it is essential that the strategies we pursue reflect the lived experiences and perspectives of the individuals we are trying to help.

Catholic Charities maintains daily, direct contact with individuals experiencing homelessness through our Soup Kitchens, Street Outreach Programs, Emergency Shelters, and Transitional Housing Programs. While statistics are useful, it is these daily interactions that give us the clearest understanding of emerging trends and unmet needs.

Despite the compounded hardships brought on by hurricanes, the COVID-19 pandemic, and prolonged economic disruption, Catholic Charities of the Virgin Islands has never closed our shelters, soup kitchens, or outreach services. We serve a population that depends on us for daily nourishment, safety, and human connection.

However, our capacity to continue this work is increasingly strained.

With federal funding cuts and ongoing funding uncertainty, Catholic Charities has been forced to reduce staff from twenty-two (22) employees to fourteen (14). Some staff hours have been cut, and remaining staff are routinely required to double up on responsibilities to maintain essential operations. We are stretched thin, yet we continue to show up every day for the people we serve.

If Catholic Charities, an organization with deep experience, community trust, and a history of resilience, is operating at this level of strain, it is important to recognize what this signals for the broader nonprofit sector and for the individuals who rely on these services.

Federal policy shifts are already shaping both current and future service delivery in the Territory.

Uncertainty surrounding Temporary Protected Status (TPS) places families at risk of losing employment and income, which directly affects housing stability. When work authorization is lost or threatened, housing loss often follows.

Changes or instability in SNAP, MAP, Medicaid, and other assistance programs increase food insecurity, worsen untreated health conditions, and accelerate pathways into homelessness. When benefits are delayed or reduced, individuals turn first to nonprofit providers for support.

At the same time, federal reductions to nonprofit funding diminish the very organizations relied upon to absorb these impacts. This creates a compounding effect: increased community need paired with reduced provider capacity.

Even as resources tighten Catholic Charities continues to work collaboratively with government and community partners to mitigate housing instability wherever possible.

Catholic Charities continue to operate housing programs including Bethlehem House Shelter I for the Homeless on St. Thomas, which has a capacity of forty (40) beds, St . Teresa of Calcutta House of Hope Transitional House on St.Croix, which has 11 single occupancy units including 1 ADA unit.

We also have two construction projects in partnership with Virgin islands Housing Finance Authority:

On St. Croix , the renovation of the Light of Christ facility which will replace the Bethlehem Shelter on St. Croix that was destroyed by Hurricane Maria. Light of Christ once completed will provide 15 double occupancy units, 2 family units and 2 ADA units.

On St. Thomas , the renovation and construction of the Bethlehem House Shelter II facility once completed will provide 8 double occupancy units, 1 family unit and 1 ADA unit.

In addition, Catholic Charities continues to partner with the Community Foundation of the Virgin Islands to assist individuals and families through the Rapid Response Block Grant, and to support seniors through the Hodge Senior Citizen Assistance Fund. These partnerships are critical in addressing immediate needs, but they cannot replace sustained public investment.

Many of you may remember when Mrs. Shillingford previously appeared before this body and reported that the Virgin Islands received twenty (20) Emergency Housing Vouchers. Catholic Charities of the Virgin Islands served as the lead agency for this initiative, and all twenty vouchers were successfully assigned to individuals experiencing homelessness.

We have since been informed that this program has been discontinued, and participating clients are being transferred into the Housing Choice Voucher Program. While this transition may appear administrative in nature, the practical implications for participants are significant.

Under the Emergency Housing Voucher program, Catholic Charities and other nonprofits provided hands-on case management, guiding participants through the process, assisting with documentation, ensuring compliance with program requirements, and helping individuals navigate the many barriers that often prevent housing placement from being sustained.

With the termination of this program, that level of support is no longer funded. For participants, this effectively means there is no longer a nonprofit in-between to walk alongside them. They are now expected to navigate the system independently, without the structured support that was specifically designed to help individuals with complex needs succeed in housing.

Simply put, THERE IS NO MIDDLEMAN.

For individuals who have experienced long-term homelessness, behavioral health challenges, or limited system literacy, the loss of this support significantly increases the risk of voucher loss, housing instability, and eventual returns to homelessness. This is not a reflection of unwillingness on the part of participants, but rather a reminder that housing alone is not always enough—support matters.

I want to emphasize this: the decisions made by this Legislature directly determine whether organizations like Catholic Charities can continue to prevent homelessness—or whether more Virgin Islanders will fall into crisis with nowhere to turn.

Legislative funding is not simply a budget line. It is the difference between prevention and emergency response, between stability and displacement, and between dignity and despair.

Catholic Charities of the Virgin Islands remains committed to serving our community with compassion and accountability. But we cannot sustain this work without reliable, timely, and adequate support.

We respectfully ask for your continued partnership and for funding decisions that recognize the essential role nonprofit organizations play in maintaining housing stability across the Territory.

Our guiding principle is the preservation and enhancement of human dignity.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions.