



THE DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES

Committee on Housing, Transportation & Telecommunications

Wednesday 11 February 2026
**SENATOR MARVIN A. BLYDEN,
CHAIRMAN**

Testimony of Commissioner Averil E. George
Committee on **Housing, Transportation & Telecommunications**
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I. INTRODUCTION

Good morning, Chairman Blyden, members of the Committee on Housing, Transportation and Telecommunications, legislative staff, fellow cabinet members and testifiers, members of the public who are viewing and listening today. I am Averil E. George, Commissioner of the Virgin Islands Department of Human Services. Joining me today, I have the pleasure of being accompanied by our Assistant Commissioner Taetia Phillips-Dorsett and our new Director of Non-Profit and Support Services, Ms. Lavern Marsh. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you to provide an update on homelessness in the United States Virgin Islands and to discuss the role of the Department of Human Services within the broader, Territory-wide response to this extremely complex issue.

Homelessness is not an abstract policy problem. It is **a daily, lived reality for many of our residents here in the territory**, and it is one of the most visible indicators of broader structural challenges related to housing availability, economic instability, medical and behavioral health access as well as social support systems. The Department of Human Services continues to work in close collaboration with other government agencies, nonprofit service providers, faith-based organizations, and community partners to respond to both the immediate needs of individuals experiencing homelessness and the long-term system gaps that perpetuate housing instability across the Territory.

II. CONTEXT AND THE HUMAN IMPACT OF HOMELESSNESS

Each day, DHS front-line staff receive urgent requests for assistance that reflect the diverse and increasingly complex pathways into homelessness in the Virgin Islands. These calls include individuals who arrive in the Territory for work and quickly find themselves without social supports or financial reserves; families living out of vehicles or rotating between temporary arrangements; older adults with no surviving relatives who require continuous supervision and care; individuals sleeping in tents on the beach, or informal encampments, often while living with untreated behavioral health conditions or substance use disorders; business owners and residents concerned about people sleeping in doorways, along shorelines, cemeteries or in abandoned structures; and multi-generational households compressed into single rented rooms, unable to secure stable and safe long-term housing.

These experiences underscore an essential truth that must remain central to our policy discussions: homelessness is not a choice. It is the result of intersecting forces, including the severe shortage of affordable housing, rising living costs, limited wages, domestic violence, family breakdown, untreated mental illness, substance use disorders, and long-standing system gaps that predate recent economic pressures. Homelessness is both a housing issue and a human services issue, requiring coordinated solutions across sectors.

III. ROLE OF THE DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES

Given ongoing questions regarding the Department of Human Services' statutory responsibilities, it is important to clearly distinguish between the Department's role in operating custodial institutions and its role in the Territory's homelessness response system. The Department of Human Services does not directly operate long-term housing or shelter facilities. Our role within the homelessness response system is focused on intake, eligibility determination, emergency assistance, benefits access, system navigation, and coordination with partner agencies that provide sheltering, outreach, transitional housing, permanent supportive housing, and wraparound services.

Title 3, Section 431 of the Virgin Islands Code authorizes the Department of Human Services to plan, administer, and operate *public institutions providing custodial care or shelters furnishing institutional care* for individuals who cannot live independently, including the aged, infirm, and persons with significant disabilities. This authority pertains to long-term residential care settings that require continuous supervision and structured support. These settings are fundamentally different from emergency or transitional homeless shelters, which are short-term, non-custodial, and designed to serve individuals capable of independent living with appropriate support.

Outside of custodial care, DHS's direct involvement in shelter operations is limited to emergency disaster response. During declared emergencies such as hurricanes, DHS activates and manages temporary hurricane shelters under **Emergency Support Function (ESF) #6**, utilizing existing public facilities—most commonly schools—to provide short-term, life-safety sheltering for impacted populations. These **emergency disaster shelters** are temporary, non-residential in nature, and are not homeless shelters or housing programs.

With respect to homelessness specifically, **Title 29, Section 203 of the Virgin Islands Code** assigns responsibility for emergency housing planning, construction, and maintenance to the Virgin Islands Housing Finance Authority, working in conjunction with the Interagency Council on Homelessness and the Commissioner of Human Services. In that context, DHS's role is cooperative and supportive—focused on coordination, planning, and client access to services—not on owning, operating, or managing housing facilities. **DHS does not serve as a housing provider** and is not the agency responsible for resolving homelessness through housing placement or shelter operations.

This structure is reinforced by **Executive Order 538-2024**, which establishes homelessness as a shared, interagency responsibility and designates DHS as the coordinating and administrative agency for the Interagency Council on Homelessness. Under Governor Bryan's Executive Order, DHS supports intake, referrals, benefits access, and system planning, while shelter and housing operations remain with housing authorities and nonprofit providers that have the appropriate statutory authority.

DHS serves as a stabilizing entry point for individuals and families in crisis, ensuring that residents are connected to available resources while broader housing solutions are pursued through interagency collaboration. Emergency and Transitional homeless shelters in the territory are operated by **nonprofit, faith-based, and housing organizations** that own, lease, or manage the physical facilities

and deliver shelter services in accordance with housing, fire, and safety regulations

Our funded and collaborating partners include organizations such as Catholic Charities of the Virgin Islands, which operates emergency and transitional sheltering and territorial outreach; Bethlehem House on St. Thomas, which provides overnight shelter, family units, and transitional housing; House of Hope on St. Croix, offering transitional housing and independent living supports; Lutheran Social Services, which provides housing for seniors and adults with disabilities; Meeting The Needs of the Community (MTOC), delivering permanent supportive housing, transitional housing, and veteran services; The Village and Project Hope Outreach Ministries, which operate recovery and supportive housing for individuals with substance use disorders; Family Resource Center and Women's Coalition of St. Croix, which provide shelter and services for victims of domestic violence; and numerous outreach, food, and prevention providers serving unsheltered individuals territory-wide.

The Department knows its partners, understands their capacity, and relies on them to deliver services that DHS is not statutorily structured to operate. Our role is to ensure coordination, funding oversight, referrals, and system stability so these organizations can continue their critical work.

IV. HOUSING AND SYSTEM CAPACITY CHALLENGES

The most consistent and urgent challenge reported by both nonprofit partners and public-sector housing agencies is the severe shortage of affordable housing units across the Territory. This shortage is exacerbated by multiple compounding factors, including the conversion of long-term rental units into short-term accommodations, insufficient emergency shelter and transitional housing capacity, and slow turnover rates within shelters as individuals remain longer due to the absence of available permanent housing options. In addition, many landlords remain reluctant to participate in voucher-based programs because of extended processing timelines and administrative barriers, further limiting placement opportunities for households with the lowest incomes.

Post-hurricane damage has also had a lasting impact on homelessness response infrastructure, particularly on St. Croix, where key shelter facilities were lost or significantly reduced and have not yet been fully replaced. As a result, demand for emergency shelter, transitional housing, permanent supportive housing, and deeply affordable units continues to far exceed available resources, placing strain on service providers and leaving many individuals unsheltered.

V. CRISIS INTERVENTION AND MISCELLANEOUS FUNDS

The Department of Human Services administers, and monitors Crisis Intervention and Miscellaneous Funds appropriated by the Government of the Virgin Islands to support nonprofit and community-based organizations providing direct services to individuals and families experiencing homelessness or housing instability. These funds are specifically intended to address immediate survival needs, crisis stabilization, and short-term interventions that prevent further harm while longer-term housing solutions are pursued through coordinated systems.

It is essential that miscellaneous appropriations to nonprofit organizations are prioritized and released

at the beginning of each fiscal year, as these non-profits serve as the primary administrators of critical public health and public safety programs that engage unsheltered and unhoused individuals and comprehensively address their needs.

During Fiscal Year 2025, DHS directed approximately **\$410,000** in Crisis Intervention and Miscellaneous funding to nonprofit partners providing homelessness-related services across the Territory. These allocations supported emergency shelter operations, transitional housing services, outreach and engagement activities, meal programs, and case management for individuals experiencing unsheltered and sheltered homelessness.

Funded partners included **Bethlehem House on St. Thomas and St. Croix**, which together received approximately **\$175,000** to support emergency shelter and stabilization services for adults experiencing homelessness, and **Catholic Charities of the Virgin Islands**, which received approximately **\$235,000** to support emergency assistance, housing-related services, and coordinated outreach efforts aligned with Continuum of Care priorities.

The Department remains committed to working closely with nonprofit partners and fiscal agencies to resolve any outstanding administrative issues as quickly as possible. We recognize that these organizations operate on tight margins and provide essential services on the front lines of homelessness response, public health, and public safety. For that reason, DHS continues to prioritize communication, technical assistance, and coordination to ensure that appropriated funds are accessed and disbursed appropriately.

VI. ELIGIBILITY AND PUBLIC ASSISTANCE SERVICES

Many individuals and families experiencing homelessness are eligible for federal and local public assistance programs administered by DHS. These include **Medicaid**, which provides access to essential medical and behavioral health services; the **Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)**, which supports food security; and cash assistance programs such as **Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)**, Old Age Assistance, Temporary Disability Assistance, and Aid to the Permanent and Totally Disabled, depending on age, disability status, and household composition.

The Department's **Division of Family Assistance** ensures that the absence of a permanent physical address never serves as a barrier to applying for or receiving benefits. Homeless households may qualify for expedited SNAP services, with benefits issued within seven days when eligibility criteria are met. These programs play a vital role in stabilizing individuals and families, reducing immediate hardship, and supporting pathways out of homelessness.

VII. OFFICE OF INTAKE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES

The Department's **Office of Intake and Emergency Services (OIES)** provides critical short-term interventions that can prevent homelessness where possible and support individuals and families already experiencing housing instability. Services include emergency welfare assistance, transient travel support, family preservation services, crisis stabilization, and referrals to appropriate partner agencies. This office often serves as the first point of contact for residents in acute crisis and works to

de-escalate emergencies while connecting clients to longer-term supports.

In addition to coordinating shelter and service referrals, the Department of Human Services routinely responds to situations involving individuals who arrive in the Territory without housing, financial resources, or local support systems. In these cases, DHS provides short-term emergency assistance, which may include arranging one night of temporary accommodation to ensure immediate safety while staff work to identify appropriate next steps.

When feasible and appropriate, DHS assists in contacting family members or support networks off island who are willing and able to receive the individual. The Department may then facilitate the individual's return to their place of origin through the purchase of airline tickets, ensuring a safe transition to family-based support. This approach allows DHS to address immediate humanitarian needs while avoiding long-term system involvement, reducing costs to the Territory, and preventing individuals from entering chronic homelessness locally.

VIII. INTERAGENCY COUNCIL ON HOMELESSNESS

The Territory's response to homelessness is strengthened through the work of the Interagency Council on Homelessness, which serves as the central coordinating body for policy alignment, system planning, and cross-agency collaboration. The Interagency Council brings together leadership from the Virgin Islands Housing Finance Authority, the Virgin Islands Housing Authority, the Department of Health, the Office of Management and Budget, first responder agencies, nonprofit partners, and other key stakeholders to develop unified strategies, reduce duplication, and ensure that services and housing interventions are aligned across the Territory. Through regular meetings, data sharing, and joint planning efforts, the Council facilitates a cohesive, Territory-wide approach to addressing homelessness that no single agency could achieve independently.

DHS's role within the Council is focused on administrative support, strategic planning, client service coordination, and ensuring that individuals experiencing homelessness have streamlined access to the benefits and supports for which they are eligible. To function at the level required by the magnitude of need, the Interagency Council on Homelessness requires sustained investment in planning personnel, data infrastructure, and operational capacity.

Formalizing and adequately funding the Council will allow the Territory to move from crisis-driven responses to a long-term, coordinated system that links emergency services, housing development, behavioral health supports, and wraparound services under a unified strategy. Strengthening the Council is essential to ensuring that homelessness is addressed not simply as a housing issue, but as a complex, multi-system challenge requiring ongoing collaboration across government and community partners.

IX. CONTINUUM OF CARE AND EMERGENCY HOUSING VOUCHERS

The Department of Human Services participates in the Continuum of Care Emergency Housing Voucher case conferencing process, as required by the **U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)**. This process ensures coordinated referrals through the Continuum of Care Council on Homelessness. Catholic Charities of the Virgin Islands serves as the lead agency for the **HUD-sponsored Emergency Housing Voucher program**, submitting eligible referrals to the Virgin Islands Housing Authority for voucher issuance. **Point-in-Time data** and system performance trends underscore the importance of strengthening Continuum of Care coordination, expanding landlord partnerships, and increasing the inventory of housing units willing to accept voucher-based residents. Without sufficient unit availability, vouchers alone cannot resolve homelessness.

X. POINT-IN-TIME COUNT FINDINGS

The results of the 2025 United States Virgin Islands Point-in-Time Count make one reality unmistakably clear: homelessness in the Territory has reached a level of urgency that can no longer be treated as a peripheral concern. The Count, conducted on January 23, 2025, identified **306 individuals experiencing homelessness** across the Territory—an unacceptably high number for a community of our size. Of those individuals, **241 were unsheltered**, sleeping outdoors, in vehicles, or in locations not meant for habitation. Only **65 individuals were in emergency or transitional shelter** at the time of the Count. These findings confirm what service providers have been reporting for years: our shelter capacity is below demand, and far too many residents have no safe place to sleep.

The subpopulation data underscores the severity and complexity of the crisis. A significant portion of those counted were experiencing **chronic homelessness**, and the overwhelming majority of them were unsheltered—living without stability, without medical support, and without access to safe shelter. The Count also identified **veterans**, **unaccompanied youth**, and individuals living with **serious mental illness, substance abuse disorders**, and **HIV/AIDS**, all of whom face higher risks of harm when left without stable housing or care.

HOUSING INVENTORY COUNT

The most recent Housing Inventory Count from the Continuum of Care (COC), highlights ongoing capacity constraints across the Territory's shelter and housing system. **Catholic Charities' Bethlehem Shelter** currently provides 40 emergency beds, all in active use, while **MTOC's** veteran emergency program is operating at capacity with 3 beds. Transitional housing resources, though limited, continue to offer important support through programs such as Hearts in Service, St. Teresa of Calcutta, Genesis House, Our Lady of Charity, and MTOC's SRO, which together supply just under 50 beds, the majority of which are consistently utilized.

Victim service providers remain essential contributors to the housing response, with the **Family Resource Center** and the **Women's Coalition** jointly maintaining 20 beds that are regularly filled. Permanent supportive housing—vital for individuals with long-term needs—remains a focused area for development, **with MTOC's PSH programs and HUD VASH VA** program collectively offering fewer than 50 beds Territory-wide. Additional rapid rehousing resources are available through

veteran-serving programs, providing short-term assistance aimed at stabilization and transition.

These statistics are not abstract. The data exposes long-standing gaps in housing availability, behavioral health infrastructure, and coordinated service delivery—and without a sustained, interagency, data-driven strategy, the Territory will remain in a reactive posture, and the many vulnerable residents in our community will continue to fall through the cracks.

XI. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on data, program experience, and ongoing collaboration with partners, the Department of Human Services recommends continued legislative and executive support to formalize and adequately fund the Interagency Council on Homelessness, including planning staff, data management capacity, and system coordination infrastructure.

DHS also emphasizes the urgent need to develop and fund additional emergency shelter and transitional housing capacity, particularly on St. Croix, and to invest in permanent supportive housing to reduce chronic homelessness. DHS also recommends that the emergency housing vouchers distribution process includes a tiered system that prioritizes unhoused residents within that program structure. Targeted outreach and drop-in centers must be supported and strengthened to engage unsheltered individuals where they are. Finally, increased investment in affordable housing development for extremely low-income households, coupled with improved landlord incentives and streamlined voucher processing, will be critical to improving housing placement outcomes.

XII. CLOSING

In closing, homelessness in the Virgin Islands demands sustained, coordinated action grounded in data, compassion, and shared responsibility. The Department of Human Services remains committed to working collaboratively with the Legislature, the Governor, sister agencies, nonprofit partners, faith-based organizations, the private sector, and the broader community to strengthen our response and to ensure that every resident has access to safety, dignity, and stability. We appreciate the Committee's continued engagement on this issue and stand ready to answer any questions you may have.