

Good morning, Honorable Sen. Blyden, Members of the Committee on Housing, Transportation and Telecommunications, members of the 36th Legislature of the US Virgin Islands, staff, testifiers and other individuals listening.

My name is Andrea Shillingford, and I am privileged to serve as the Executive Director of Catholic Charities of the Virgin Islands, an agency of the Roman Catholic Diocese of the Virgin Islands.

I appreciate the opportunity to come before you today and again report to you on our ongoing efforts at Catholic Charities to address homelessness in the Virgin Islands.

With me today are Ms. Sandra Thomas-Mason, Assistant to the Executive Director
Calvin Charles, Soup Kitchen Custodian

Kelvin Guzman Bethlehem House Shelter Custodian

Both of these gentlemen are consumers who are now fully employed by Catholic Charities.

As you know, there has been and continues to be much community discourse on homelessness and its impact on health and quality of life of Virgin Islands residents. Housing, of course, is a major determinant of the health and wellbeing of our people, and we need to develop strategies to move people off the streets that are logistically effective, financially feasible, and supportive of human dignity.

Every homeless person lives his or her own situation with its own story. So, it is important to pursue strategies that address their perspective.

For this reason, we at Catholic Charities of the Virgin Islands maintain the daily contact with those individuals through the services of our Soup Kitchens, Street Outreach Programs, Emergency Shelters and Transitional Housing Programs.

we can provide you with statistical data regarding homelessness in the Virgin Islands. However, keep in mind that statistics do not tell the whole story of homelessness and other housing needs. The best way to understand this is to use federal standards to break down the problems:

The U.S. Department of **Housing and Urban Development (HUD)** has several **categories of homelessness**

1. Literally Homeless:

Individuals and families who live in a place not meant for human habitation (including but not limited to, the streets or in their car), emergency shelters, transitional housing and hotel stays paid for by a government or charitable organization.

2. Imminent Risk of Homelessness

Individuals or families who lose their primary nighttime residence within 14 days and have no other resources or support network to obtain permanent housing

3. Homeless under other Statutes

Unaccompanied youth under 25 years of age, or families with children and youth, who do not meet other categories but are homeless under other federal statutes, have not had a lease and have moved 2 or more times in the past 60 days and are likely to remain unstable because of special needs or barriers.

4. Fleeing Domestic Violence

Individuals or families who are fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault or stalking and who lack resources and support networks to obtain other permanent housing.

Hidden Homelessness

Homelessness is not just about those we see living on the streets, it includes hidden populations struggling to find and maintain stable housing. There are three critical groups we often overlook.

1. Couch Surfers – Individuals who rely on temporary stays with friends or family but have no permanent home.
2. Elderly in Emergency Shelters – seniors who need medical or assisted living but remain in shelters due to lack of appropriate facilities.
3. Hospital Boarders – Patients who remain hospitalized because there are no transitional or permanent housing to discharge them to.

These individuals are trapped in systems that do not meet their needs, leading to overcrowding in shelters, strain on healthcare resources, and a lack of long-term solutions.

Let's imagine for a moment.

After the storms in 2017, a 69-year-old female (now 74) was living in a badly damaged apartment complex. The roof was left with gaping holes that allowed rain to soak through her belongings. No electricity, no running water. For years she lived in this deplorable squalor. Sleeping on a damp mattress, eating what ever non-perishable food she could get. No family, only a neighbor who would sometimes take food to her. Despite her situation it was never flagged for emergency assistance.

Without proper shelter she was exposed to mold, heat and unsanitary conditions.

Eventually through the collaboration of government agencies and Catholic Charities, she was placed at Bethlehem House Shelter.

This story is not unique. There are many elderly individuals in the Virgin Islands who, due to lack of resources, find themselves in similar situations. Without emergency housing for seniors, transitional care programs and assisted living facilities, more vulnerable residents will continue to suffer in silence.

Legislative funding account for 50% of our yearly operational budget. Each year we are asked to submit requests for funding, and we receive Notice of Awards. Each year it become increasingly more difficult to receive the allocated funding. I know

that here I speak for 95% of all the non-profits that depend on this Legislative funding.

Our fundamental principle at Catholic Charities is the preservation and enhancement of human dignity. Homelessness is not a choice. We must not judge homeless persons because we do not know their stories or experiences. Should we take the time to listen, it will make a difference in the way that we deal with homelessness in the territory.

There are currently several programs designed to alleviate some of the stress and uncertainty that comes with homelessness or imminent homelessness.

Catholic Charities of the Virgin Islands is one of several agencies working with the Virgin Islands Housing Finance Authority as an intake center for the Emergency Rental Assistance Program.

We were the lead agency for the Emergency Housing Voucher which, was administered by the Virgin Islands Housing Authority. This program provided twenty (20) vouchers for permanent housing to homeless individuals. Twenty referrals were made to VIHA and the vouchers have all been assigned.

Catholic Charities of the Virgin Islands Housing Programs

Catholic Charities of the Virgin Islands continues to operate several housing programs.

Bethlehem House Shelter for the Homeless St. Thomas with a capacity of forty beds. The male section is usually full. Previously the females transitioned at a faster rate but sadly we are now seeing a shift in that the demand for women with children has increased and they remain at the shelter much longer.

St. Theresa of Calcutta House of Hope on St. Croix provides a transitional housing program which has eleven fully furnished studio apartments.

CCVI has received funding through the Community Development Block Grant for new Emergency Shelters/transitional housing on St. Thomas, and St. Croix. Work on both projects is progressing.

When we talk about Housing Instability we talk from a Christian and humanitarian point of view.

We talk about the current situation where unstable employment and exorbitant rent costs is forcing more individuals into homelessness.

Conclusion:

I will conclude my presentation by reminding this body of the current trend of homelessness in the Virgin Islands.

Housing displacement or “couch surfing” is now trending as the new normal condition for many individuals and as can be expected has now become a cause for serious concern.

Individuals who lost income and as a result, their permanent housing have been living with family or friends.

The existing housing stock, especially on St. Thomas and St. John is inadequate to meet the needs of the community.

The waiting list at VIHFA is closed because many of their units need to be repaired. VIHA’s waiting list is long and there is no special facility or accommodations for individuals needing Emergency Housing.

Honorable Senators, the situation is dire especially with the recent Executive Orders which have us all uncertain of the ‘What’s Next.’