

TESTIMONY
DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, HOSPITALS, AND HUMAN SERVICES
33RD LEGISLATURE OF THE U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS
FEBRUARY 4, 2019
EARLE B. OTTLEY CHAMBERS, CHARLOTTE AMALIE

Good afternoon, Honorable Oakland Benta, Chairman of the Committee on Health,

Hospitals, and Human Services, other distinguished members of the 33rd Legislature, and the listening and viewing audience. My name is Felecia L. Blyden, Acting Commissioner of the Department of Human Services. Please allow me to first acknowledge the hard-working men and women of the Department of Human Services; from the direct care staff who work on the frontlines, to those who tirelessly serve in the background. We have some of the most dedicated and passionate employees in the Territory; and I just want to say that I, as your Acting Commissioner, and the Virgin Islands Community at large are appreciative of your service.

It is indeed an honor to appear before this distinguished body today to present testimony on the current status of the Department of Human Services. I am accompanied by Assistant Commissioners Janet Turnbull-Krigger and Evril Powell from both the St. Thomas/St. John and St. Croix districts respectively, who will assist in this afternoon's presentation. Senator Benta, we congratulate you as you assume the position of Chairman of the Committee on Health, Hospitals, and Human Services of the 33rd Legislature of the United States Virgin Islands. We also commit to our role as we

collaborate with this committee on matters of public policy so as to improve efficiency and provide effective delivery of social services throughout the territory.

The Department of Human Services (DHS) is one of the Government of the Virgin Islands' (GVI) largest departments, with 705 employees providing services territorially;

through 12 divisions and 84 programs located on St. Thomas, St. Croix, and St. John. Pursuant to Title 34 of the Virgin Islands Code (VIC) the Department is designated as the State Agency for all publicly financed social service programs, except those relative to public health and housing. The Department provides services to low-income families, persons with disabilities, at risk youth, juvenile offenders, and the elderly. In accordance with Title 5, Section 2536 of the Virgin Islands Code, DHS is mandated to serve as the authorized agency for the protection and care of abused and neglected children. The Department's mission is to provide social services to enhance the quality of life for individuals and families. We provide services to individuals from infants to the elderly while serving as the Territory's "safety net" for the provision of social and financial services for the neediest.

Additionally, DHS holds significant disaster responsibilities and serves as the lead agency for Emergency Service Function Six (ESF 6), which includes mass care, sheltering, feeding, and emergency housing functions. Although this is an unbudgeted mandate, the Department operates storm shelters as needed in partnership with the American Red Cross. We are also responsible for assisting the Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency (VITEMA) with coordinating community assessments and other post-disaster initiatives.

FAMILY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

As we look at the national landscape, the implications of the Federal Shut Down on our federally funded programs, particularly the Supplementary Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) are very concerning. We continue to maintain close communication with the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food and Nutrition Services (FNS) relative to the impact of the shut down on our residents who rely on this critical program to feed their families. FNS authorized the early issuance of benefits for February and our beneficiaries were provided with information relative to budgeting wisely as we cannot confirm that March benefits will be provided. Below is a chart which delineates the benefits that were disbursed to families.

US Virgin Islands Early Issuance Report		
Total February Benefits Issued:		
Process Date: January 2019		
Availability Date: Jan. 16, 2019		
District	Number of Households	Total Amount
St. Thomas	5897	\$ 1,944,776.00
Christiansted	3,554	\$ 1,242,271.00
Frederiksted	2,093	\$ 801,130.00
USVI Total	11,554	\$ 3,989,177.00

DHS is developing projections relative to providing stipends to residents if the shutdown is reinstated and benefits for March are not issued. These expenses are not reimbursable by the Federal Government. Based on the figures above, DHS would require approximately \$3.9M of local funding monthly to sustain benefits for residents at

the current level. However, it is important that we are proactive rather than reactive. The Division of Family Assistance has been in communication with other states through our Regional Office to explore options that may be implemented. In the event that federal funds are not available, the VI may consider utilization of a coupon system or an agreed upon formula, based on the family's current monthly benefits.

FUNDING

The Department's Fiscal Year 2019 General Fund Budget as appropriated by Act 8123 is \$65,599,557 for the operations of our twelve (12) divisions and other support programs.

The Department of Human Services expects to receive \$162,586,237 in federal funds in FY2019. We expect to distribute at least \$55,000,000 in SNAP benefits. SNAP benefits are shown separately since they are paid directly from the federal government to the grocery retailers. Our federal funding comes from the US Department of Health and Human Services, US Department of Housing and Urban Development, US Department of Agriculture, US Department of Education, US Department of Justice, US Department of Labor and the US Corporation for National Service.

PERSONNEL

As of January 2019, the Department of Human Services has 705 full-time employees and 87 vacancies. Ninety-five (95) employees are exempt while 610 are classified. There are 87 vacancies; 38 vacancies are general fund and 49 are federally funded. Nineteen of the federally funded vacancies are posted and half of the vacancies are a part of the Head Start Program. Recognizing the importance of recruitment and

retention our Office of Human Resources and Labor Relations continues to focus its efforts on attracting talent to fill critical positions to include social workers, nurses, teachers, certified nursing assistants, and homemakers.

This has been an ongoing concern within our agency for several years which has been significantly exacerbated by resignations of staff for various reasons, which include relocations due to uncompetitive compensation, the 2017 hurricanes, new career opportunities, licensing or certification requirements, and retirements. The lack of staff negatively impacts the Department's ability to effectively serve the community and fulfill our mission. Therefore, special emphasis is being placed on continuing to fill these critical vacancies. The Department is extending its reach and engaging with potential candidates; utilizing targeted media campaigns and other initiatives.

The Department of Human Services has forty-seven contracts of which thirty-seven are in the process of being renewed. An Executive Legal Assistant has been hired to support the Legal Counsel and a Contract Administrator will be on board shortly. Timely execution of contracts will facilitate improved relations with our contractors and other stakeholders.

SENIOR CITIZENS AFFAIRS

The Division of Senior Citizens Affairs seeks to improve the quality of life for seniors by affording them the opportunity to remain in their homes and to reduce isolation for institutional care. It is comprised of programs and services which provide support for independence, community awareness and to prevent exploitation of the elderly. This Division seeks to ensure a coordinated, comprehensive and responsive system of quality services designed to benefit older individuals.

Programs/services in SCA that have experienced significant challenges.

- Queen Louise Home and Herbert Grigg Home for the elderly have experienced staffing challenges and compromised facilities
- The Meals on Wheels Program which provides nutritionally balanced hot lunches for persons 60 years and older as well as disabled persons under the age of 60 has experienced challenges with transportation and staffing
- The Homemaker Services program continues to experience challenges with staffing and transportation
- The Adult Protective Services Unit continues to experience challenges with recruitment of staff. This is a very essential program as they respond to reports of elder abuse, neglect or exploitation of disabled adults between the ages of eighteen to fifty-nine and senior citizens ages 60 and older. The staff screens and evaluates abuse cases for services that include placement at homes for the aged as well as specialized services from other community agencies.

DIVISION OF JUVENILE JUSTICE

The Division of Juvenile Justice serves pre-delinquents, Persons in Need of Supervision (PINS), and adjudicated youths through provision of social work and juvenile probation services. The overall goal of the unit is to provide long-term intervention, social work supportive services, referrals, counseling, case management and other types of services to families that experience extreme and chronic dysfunction and/or are at high-risk. DHS has a critical role in breaking the cycle of multi-generational poverty.

HAWK (Higher Achievement Wisdom and Knowledge) is a group that was developed by the Juvenile Justice program to equip young people with the skills to help them make a successful transition from childhood into adulthood. The program offers tools to enable them to gain an understanding that their person (the physical, the mental, and the spiritual) are sacred and that they are loved, respected, and valued by their community.

My Brother's Workshop is a non-profit charitable corporation that works closely with the Division of Juvenile Justice to provide services to at-risk young people offering mentoring, counselling, paid job training, education, and job placement. The Division also collaborates with several other community organizations to provide prevention and/or intervention services for at-risk youth. The Department of Human Services would like to implement new programs as well as augment successful programs. Proper program evaluation is necessary in order for us to utilize resources efficiently and identify changes necessary to make the programs more viable.

In the St. Thomas/St. John District, we have seen somewhat of a decline in juvenile delinquent cases over the past five years, however, there is a steady increase in the non-delinquent (or as we call them, the pre-delinquent) population. This leads us to conclude that we need to concentrate our resources on prevention. An area of major concern is what happens after the clients leave Juveniles Justice services. The opposite is true of our St. Croix district, where we realize the need to shore up both prevention and intervention services.

The harsh reality is that multiple factors influence whether or not youth violence occurs. These influences vary as children get older and the community around them

changes. A young person's characteristics and experiences play an important role, and so do their relationships with friends and family and the characteristics of the community in which they live.

Presently, the Youth Rehabilitation Center (YRC) on St. Croix is the only secure detention facility in the Territory providing incarceration for pre-trial and adjudicated delinquents as well as adolescents legally transferred to adult status for committing serious crimes. It is a twenty-seven (27) bed facility which on an average houses 13 youths per day. The services provided include education, recreation, medical and mental health, and social services.

The Department of Human Services and the Department of Education continue to work on providing adequate teaching staff for the residents. The current education program, Youths on the Rise, offers classes leading to obtaining a High School Diploma or a GED. Courses include Math, English and Reading Comprehension, Speech, Social Studies, Physical Education and vocational classes in Barbering and Mechanic. However, despite all of the positive efforts being concentrated toward YRC, challenges with staffing and an aging and compromised infrastructure due to the recent hurricanes have significantly impacted the level and quality of services we are able to provide.

For example, a relevant, yet affordable behavior modification treatment curriculum needs to be developed or acquired, classes have had to be cancelled due to inadequate staffing of security personnel, and overtime costs eat away at the budget. Despite these difficulties, the management and staff continue to work to

address these issues so as to provide the best quality of care possible. Additionally, we continue to consult with our national partners to guide us in taking the necessary steps to improve services.

Diversion programs are an alternative that can be considered as a strategy for juvenile violence prevention. Such programs can keep youths from coming into contact with the Juvenile Justice system or getting a juvenile charge on their record after an initial offense and can take place at many points on the juvenile justice processing continuum. Youth charged with status offenses- actions such as running away from home and being truant—are among the categories of youth most likely to be harmed by incarceration. Detaining these youths who have not been found delinquent often ensures their physical safety. However, it fails to address what is generally at the root of their problems – child abuse and neglect, poverty, family disorganization, and trauma. We must have additional programs in place to support these disturbing social ills.

Prevention requires stakeholder collaboration, leveraging resources, employment and training, implementation of educational and recreational programs, and funding at an appropriate level to sustain programs. Statistics have shown that prevention programs are more efficient and less costly than intervention programs. Unfortunately, within the Department of Human Services, the component of prevention services is sparse, and some would say “non-existent” as there is more focus on juvenile justice rather than prevention.

As a community, we can all help to address the problem of youth violence by examining the way we view and address violence in the Virgin Islands as a whole. This requires time and multiple data driven strategies. We must commit to foster safe,

stable, nurturing relationships between young people, their parents and caregivers. Change in the social and structural conditions that lead to deficits in education, limited access to health care, and concentrated poverty are vital, as these dynamics are all associated with higher rates of youth violence.

Building viable and stable communities by promoting economic opportunities and growth is critical. The economic climate of a community is created by the presence of legal and prospering businesses, the living wage of residents, and stable employment. When a community has limited legal, economic and occupational opportunities, many residents and business will leave increasing the likelihood of poverty and violence, especially among the youth.

MEDICAID / MEDICAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (MAP)

The Medical Assistance Program (MAP) or Medicaid has become one of the largest and most significant of our agency's programs. This is primarily due to the Bipartisan Budget Act (BBA), which provides an additional \$106,931,000, and possibly \$35,644,000 more to the VI's Medicaid allotment. This increase in funding will be approved by the establishment of a new expenditure matching rate of 100% for most Title XIX expenditures funded by Section 20301, including Medicaid administrative expenditures. The current federal matching rate is 55%.

The funding under the BBA is available only for expenditures incurred by the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico during the period January 1, 2018, through September 30, 2019. It is important to note that the BBA is not a permanent change in the Federal match

rate. The BBA is a temporary measure that was passed by Congress as a disaster relief measure for only two jurisdictions, the USVI and Puerto Rico.

Financial implementation guidelines for the BBA are clear and succinct. The regulations and guidelines such as those included herein are under constant scrutiny and revision to remain current within the existing policy environment. We at DHS are in an on-going conversation with our federal partners and with our local colleagues at the Department of Finance to best understand the regulatory evolution of the BBA and the impact the Bill will have on the VI Department of Human Services.

I also would like to point out that expenditures under the BBA will not only have an impact on the programs we operate but also on the residents being served by the programs. In circumstances where the programs funded by special legislation such as the BBA, the legislation will sunset in September 2019. We urge this body to consider alternative funding for this vital program enacted with sunset provisions should the US Congress fail to allocate funding.

Another factor for consideration is that if a program expands and a larger population base is served under special legislation such as BBA, the dissolution of the program means that a larger population may have challenges in obtaining services or benefits that the program provided. The ripple effect of the expiration of special funding may create service voids if alternative program arrangements have not been made.

RESIDENTIAL SERVICES

The Office of Residential Services coordinates and monitors both local and Out-of-Territory residential placements for children, youth, and adults with special needs

including behavior modification, psychological services, autism spectrum disorders and other developmental disabilities, These placements are managed between sixteen (16) separate residential programs- seven (7) contracted locally; one (1) with which the Department of Human Services has entered into a provider agreement; one (1) being directly managed by DHS, and seven (7) contracted outside of the Territory of the U.S. Virgin Islands.

DHS is further challenged with identifying and securing access to adequate acute behavioral health services for the children in our territory. Although this is a mandate of the Department of Health, Division of Mental Health, DHS is often faced with the responsibility of providing these services for children in our custody through residential services on and off island. The budget for residential placement services is \$12,582,563, which becomes increasingly difficult to manage as Court-ordered placements and unforeseen medical and travel costs regularly affect this division's budget.

IMMEDIATE CHALLENGES

As a result of Hurricanes Irma and Maria, our agency was forced to vacate its Golden Rock office in St. Croix, due to the damages sustained to the building which compromised the condition physical structure and air quality. This affected the Offices of Human Resources and Labor Relations, Intake and Emergency Services, Adult Protective Services, Fiscal, Senior Citizens Affairs (including Information and Referral, SCA Homemakers, and Meals on Wheels), Disabilities and Vocational Rehabilitation Services, Division of Family Assistance - Quality Control and Fraud Unit, Management Information Systems (MIS), and the Office of Child Care and Regulatory Services.

While these programs have been relocated to other DHS locations on the island, this “forced decentralization” has created a significant inconvenience for our residents and inefficiency of program operations. Needless to say, it has been extremely challenging to find a site that can accommodate the staff in one central location. However, we continue to work on identifying permanent office space to accommodate the staff. Staff relocations are as follows:

Anna’s Hope Head Start Administration Building:

HR & Labor Relations
Office of Child Care Regulatory Services

Anna’s Hope Children & Family Services:

Psychological Services

Richmond Senior Center:

Senior Citizens Affairs Information and Referral
Transportation

Herbert Grigg Home:

All other SCA programs
YRC- Cottage
Vocational Rehabilitation Program

DFA Marshall:

Quality Control
Fraud Unit
MIS
Payroll
Fiscal (Asset Management)

As it relates to the Knud Hansen Complex offices on St. Thomas, we are addressing issues relative to the air quality, and displacement of staff. This site has been faced with numerous challenges as we move staff around to make repairs to the building. The department continues to work on implementation of projects that have been approved by FEMA for reimbursement.

Finally, we at the Department of Human Services will persevere in our efforts to be creative in finding realistic solutions as we recognize that the interrelated societal issues of our customers require ingenuity and persistence. We look forward to working with you and this entire body to address and meet the increasing needs of the residents of our community. As such we anticipate and appreciate your support as we work together to make a meaningful difference. This concludes my testimony, I thank you for this opportunity. My staff and I are available to answer any questions that you may have.