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## Homeless Population in USVI Reaches Crisis Level; Emergency Shelters Full as Women with Children Face Growing Need

**A recent count found 304 unhoused individuals in the USVI, with shelters turning people away due to capacity limits. Lawmakers were told women with children now make up a growing share of shelter residents, as waitlists remain closed.**

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The U.S. Virgin Islands is facing a deepening homelessness crisis, with emergency shelters at capacity, waitlists closed, and critical housing shortages affecting some of the territory's most vulnerable residents. As the number of unsheltered individuals continues to grow, lawmakers and service providers are sounding the alarm over limited resources, rising demand—particularly among women with children—and the urgent need for a coordinated, territory-wide response.

In 2023, there were 252 unsheltered individuals in the territory. Two years later, the number of homeless Virgin Islanders has risen to 304, members of the Senate Committee on Housing, Transportation, and Telecommunications heard on Friday. That information, taken from a January 24 Point in Time count, was shared by Dan Derima, chair of the Continuum of Care on homelessness.

According to Mr. Derima the number of unsheltered individuals comprises “185 persons in St. Thomas, 98 persons on St. Croix, and 21 on St. John.” The true number of people experiencing homelessness is likely much higher, Mr. Derima said, as the count “does not account for individuals who are couch surfing or temporarily staying with others.”

“The territory faces critical challenges in addressing homelessness,” he declared. “We must strengthen cross-agency collaboration to braid the funding and expand the availability of emergency, transitional and permanent supportive housing,” Mr. Derima told lawmakers.

He argued that the limited housing stock in the territory makes it difficult to access emergency housing. Those in need of immediate housing options face “a two-year public housing wait list, limited Section Eight availability, and no transitional housing for justice-involved individuals,” Mr. Derima lamented. “The territory has only 23 permanent supportive housing beds, despite a demonstrated need for several hundred,” he testified.

Similar sentiments were shared by Andrea Shillingford, executive director of Catholic Charities of the Virgin Islands. “Statistics do not tell the whole story of homelessness and other housing needs,” she told lawmakers. The true picture, she said, includes an account of people who live on the street, in their cars, “emergency shelters, transitional housing and hotel stays paid for by a government or charitable organization,” as well as those at “imminent risk of homelessness.”

Hidden homelessness, said Ms. Shillingford, is the charity’s “biggest problem.” This category includes couch surfers, the elderly in emergency shelters, and hospital boarders. Catholic Charities of the Virgin Islands manages the Bethlehem House on St. Thomas, where Ms. Shillingford has noticed “a shift in the trend” when it comes to women. While previously, female residents would often transition out of the home at a faster rate than their male counterparts, Ms. Shillingford told lawmakers that now, “the demand for women with children has increased and they remain at the shelter much longer.”

With the home at capacity, Catholic Charities now has to turn people away. “We have at least two requests weekly, and it is very troubling... that we have to turn them away,” Ms. Shillingford told Senator Angel Bolques Jr., who had expressed shock and deep concern upon hearing the shift in demographics.

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

Mr. Derima also runs Meeting the Needs of our Community, Inc., a charity of the Methodist Church. His organization, too, is too full to accommodate the large numbers of people seeking shelter, many of whom congregate outside the MTOC office. MTOC is hoping to eventually be able to purchase or lease another building for that purpose, and Sen. Bolques promised to “discuss more of that with you and see what the possibilities are.”

On the part of the Virgin Islands Housing Finance Authority, lawmakers learned during Friday’s meeting that “currently on St. Thomas, our waiting list is closed because we do not have any emergency housing units available at the time,” according to Nicole Johnson, VIHFA's Director of

Facilities and Property Management. The list has been closed for “over two years,” Ms. Johnson said. On St. Croix, she disclosed, some emergency housing units have been identified for rehabilitation.

Homelessness in the territory seems to be nearing a crisis level. Meanwhile, agencies are struggling to catch up. “Governor Albert Bryan has instructed us to get all together and start strategizing about the homeless issue,” shared Eugene Jones, VIHFA’s executive director.

“Subsequent to that, we’ll have some type of plan that we submit to the Legislature,” he promised. “We need to sit down as a collective group and look at resources, look at opportunities and and come up with a strategy about how we eradicate homelessness.”

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