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Crisis: Former Inmates, Now Homeless, Threaten to Reoffend to Seek Housing in Prison

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The John A. Bell Correctional Facility (formerly the Golden Grove Correctional Facility) on St. Croix. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM

The struggle for affordable housing in the Virgin Islands has reached a crisis point for one of the most vulnerable populations: former inmates.

Marilyn Joy Carson, a transitional case manager in the Bureau of Corrections, recently conveyed the grim reality facing these individuals. Speaking at a tri-island town hall meeting, she expressed the urgency and desperation, citing the case of a former inmate now sleeping in a cemetery in Frederiksted. Ms. Carson and other advocates point to systemic failures and policies that perpetuate a cycle of homelessness and re-offense among former inmates, underscoring the need

for immediate and comprehensive solutions.

During the meeting, Ms. Carson provided valuable insights into the challenges the Bureau of Corrections faces in securing affordable housing for former inmates. Alarming, she mentioned that some individuals have threatened to re-offend as a last resort to secure a place to live — even if that place is behind bars. She also revealed her frustrations with the Virgin Islands Housing Authority (VIHA), noting her unsuccessful attempts to utilize housing vouchers meant to alleviate this crisis. Clearly, bureaucratic inefficiencies and lack of communication compound the already daunting challenges of finding stable housing for this vulnerable group.

Joining her was Dr. Suzanne Darrow-Magras, the director of the University of the Virgin Islands Center for Excellence in Learning and Leadership (UVI CELL). Dr. Darrow-Magras expanded on the hurdles faced by former inmates who, despite undergoing programs intended to prepare them for re-entry into society, find themselves struggling against an unyielding system. VIHA's policies often disqualify these individuals from public housing and housing vouchers due to their criminal records, leaving them effectively homeless and at a high risk of re-offending.

Further complicating matters, Dr. Darrow-Magras pointed out that the U.S. Virgin Islands have not accessed available federal funds allocated for transitional and permanent housing for the homeless and formerly incarcerated. This is because the local Continuum of Care Program lacks the coordinated entry system mandated by the Department of Housing and Urban Development, leaving millions of federal dollars untapped.

Echoing the sentiments of the meeting, Ms. Carson urged the government to take action. She suggested that VIHA designate certain housing units for former inmates or set up group home programs aimed at helping residents acquire life skills for self-sufficiency. These programs would parallel similar successful initiatives on the mainland United States.

Lydia Pelle, VIHA's chief operating officer, responded by acknowledging the need for a focused dialogue. She pledged to engage in one-on-one discussions with the Bureau of Corrections and incorporate the feedback from Dr. Darrow-Magras and Ms. Carson into VIHA's annual plan for 2024.

The tri-island town hall meeting shone a harsh light on an urgent issue: The plight of former inmates in the Virgin Islands who, despite serving their time, find themselves locked in another kind of prison—one of systemic indifference, homelessness, and the very real threat of falling back into a life of crime.