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Longstanding Issue of Crime in Public Housing Prompts Call for Action at Town Hall

Government / **Published On September 01, 2023 05:39 AM /**

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The Louis E. Brown Apartments, one of the V.I. Housing Authorities newest properties, has seen gun violence, including homicides. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

While the town hall meeting on August 30th centered around homeownership, maintenance, and affordable housing in the Virgin Islands, Senator Carla Joseph took the opportunity to zero in on another urgent issue: crime in public housing communities.

Specifically, Ms. Joseph, who referenced a deep familiarity with VIHA communities and the agency itself, raised the alarm about increasing gun violence and other forms of crime that have residents living in fear. Her pointed questions and recommendations reveal a gap in current plans and strategies, highlighting the need for comprehensive solutions to ensure the safety and well-

being of public housing residents.

Senator Joseph took the occasion to probe into the VIHA's annual plan for the 2024 fiscal year, questioning whether it adequately addresses the rising trend of violent crime, particularly involving firearms. She expressed dissatisfaction with the current plan's approach to safety and crime prevention. Speaking directly to Lydia Pelle, VIHA's Chief Operations Officer, Sen. Joseph criticized the plan for lacking a detailed strategy to combat crime within public housing.

In defense, Ms. Pelle pointed to the resident wellness section of the annual plan, which mentioned coordination efforts with the Virgin Islands Police Department and the Gun Violence Taskforce. However, Sen. Joseph was unimpressed, arguing that these measures were insufficiently detailed and needed further elaboration.

The senator didn't stop at criticisms; she also offered constructive solutions. Among her recommendations were the implementation of community policing initiatives and the revival of a former practice that allowed police officers to live in public housing communities at discounted rent. She further inquired whether VIHA plans to introduce surveillance cameras in key areas, as residents are increasingly fearful due to crimes happening in broad daylight. She closed her remarks by lamenting the scarcity of new ideas and community involvement in addressing the urgent issue of crime in public housing.

The matter of crime in affordable housing communities is far from new. Historical records, including reports from the past 20 years, indicate that illegal firearms and other criminal elements have been longstanding problems within VIHA properties. Attempts to eradicate such activities date back to the early 2000s, when national policies aimed at eliminating criminal elements within public housing were put in place.