

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Senator Criticizes DHS's Slow Movement To Address Massive 240-Person Meals on Wheels Wait List

Assistant Commissioner Reports \$1.2 Million Shortfall for Program Needs

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Sen. Donna Frett-Gregory. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

During a committee meeting on Thursday, Senator Donna Frett-Gregory voiced sharp criticism over the Department of Human Services' (DHS) slow progress in addressing a substantial backlog of approximately 240 individuals on the Meals on Wheels waitlist.

Assistant Commissioner of the DHS, Denelle Baptiste, confronted tough questions as she reported on the program's struggles with funding and staffing shortages to the

Committee of Health, Hospitals, and Housing.

Ms. Frett-Gregory challenged the DHS for not having vetted the current waitlist, which comprises 160 individuals on St. Croix and 80 on St. Thomas. Ms. Baptiste revealed that an estimated additional \$1.2 million is needed to serve these applicants, a figure that the senator questioned given the incomplete vetting process.

"We are not even sure as to whether or not this universe of individuals who have applications actually qualify," Ms. Frett-Gregory observed, raising concerns about the potential hastiness of the department's approach.

Ms. Baptiste defended the department's estimation, indicating that many on the list come recommended by the Adult Protective Services Unit, suggesting a likelihood of their qualification. She also noted that some beneficiaries were added during the pandemic without a reassessment of their continued eligibility, a point that Frett-Gregory noted as a further concern.

Despite the DHS's initiative to reassess the program's beneficiaries, Ms. Baptiste was unable to provide a timeline for completion, drawing further criticism from Ms. Frett-Gregory for the lack of concrete progress since the department's last committee update in August. "We need movement," the senator admonished.

Ms. Baptiste attempted to assure the committee that steps were being taken to analyze the program's capacity needs based on geographical data from the applications. She maintained that the DHS must make these assessments even if they will need to be revisited in the future. "We'll do it now and then we'll have to do it again," she concluded, underscoring the challenges faced by the DHS in managing the Meals on Wheels program amidst fiscal constraints.