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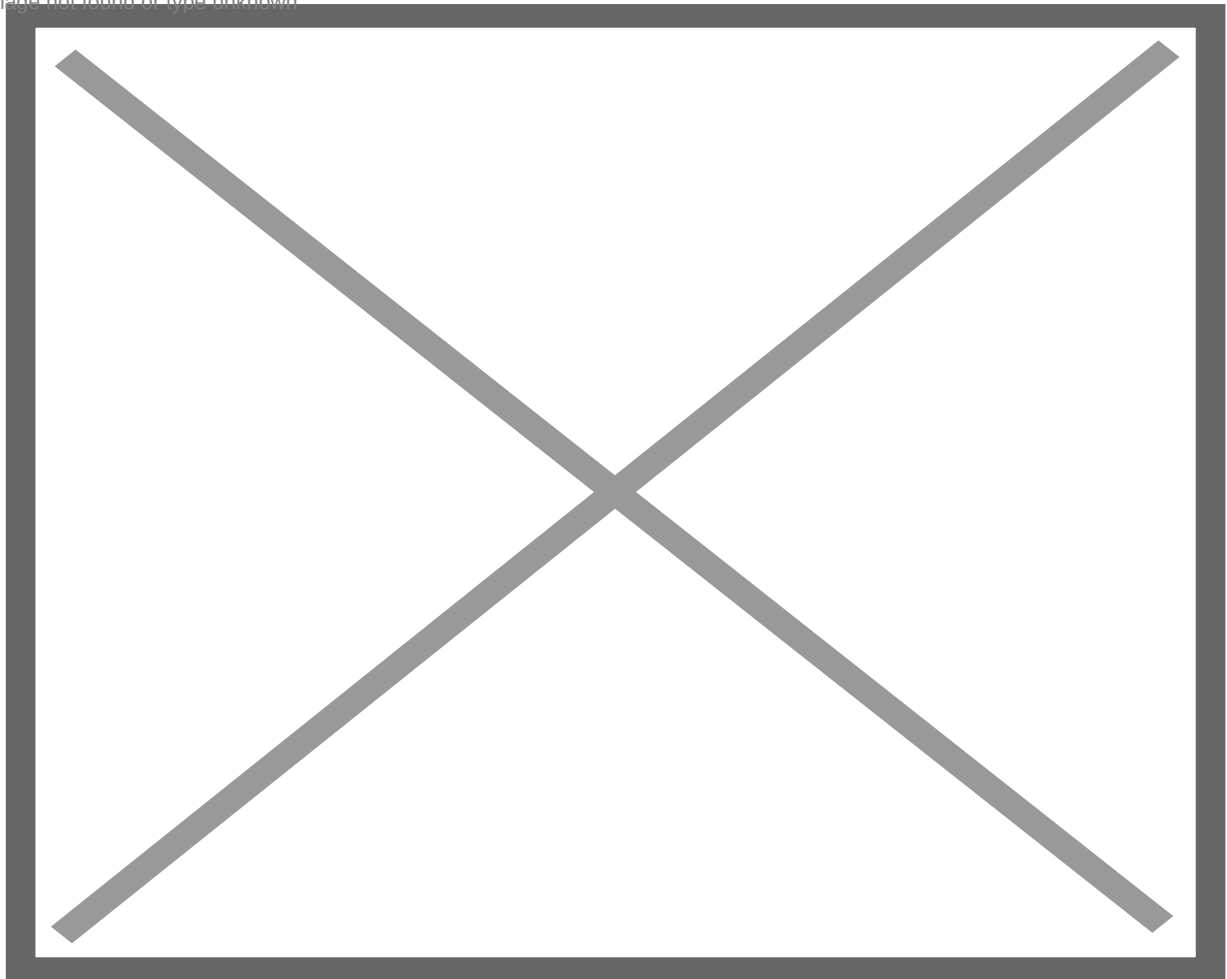
Housing Authority Bogged Down With Over 2,200 Incomplete Work Orders Across The Territory

Lawmakers question the housing authority's ability to address over 2,200 maintenance requests

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The Louis E. Brown Housing Community on St. Croix, a VIHA property. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM

Lawmakers are casting doubt on the V.I. Housing Authority's ability to complete over 2,200 outstanding work orders for public housing developments across the territory. The skepticism of members on the Senate Committee on Housing, Transportation and Telecommunications comes as VIHA's newest executive director Dwayne Alexander promised that "ensuring compliance with physical condition standards" was at the top of VIHA's list of priorities in the agency's 2024 strategic plan.

Though unable to provide information on the specific details of the 2,222 work orders on the books as of February 8th, Mr. Alexander assured lawmakers that the asset management team is “committed to addressing work orders.” The backlog is not recent, and the executive director shared that team members spent much of December “decreasing outstanding work orders” that were over 90 days old.

Nonetheless, members of the committee were appalled by the high number of outstanding orders. “What that really equates to is people living in less than perhaps adequate conditions,” suggested Senator Angel Bolques. He, like several of his other colleagues, was interested in solutions from the agency.

According to the authority, to address personnel shortages it is currently conducting interviews for three property managers and one foreman to join the maintenance team. The VIHA said it is also exploring the option of overtime for maintenance workers to “accommodate increased workloads.” Additionally, Mr. Alexander explained that work orders have also been stalled based on the “availability of supplies and materials.”

The authority’s maintenance issues are “longstanding,” triggering a need to “[enhance] internal capabilities.” Mr. Alexander, who has been in the role of executive director for two weeks, told committee members that there will be “a deliberate move away from the reliance on external consultants and contractors and redirecting our focus towards developing a core competency in property management.” Mr. Alexander succeeds former Director Robert Graham, who spent 15 years at VIHA.

Mr. Alexander explained that under policies from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, VIHA has 11 days to address any work order. That target is currently not being met, but “we’re trying to get down to these 11 days,” he pledged. In response to a query from Senator Donna Frett-Gregory about whether VIHA had a pool of qualified contractors that they would rely on to quickly remedy issues at the housing communities, Mr. Alexander noted that the agency was trying, as much as possible, to deal with minor work orders internally.

Senator Dwayne DeGraff, who commented that such a large number of backlogged work orders was “unheard of,” wondered whether VIHA had a strategic plan in place to address the issues being faced by residents. In response, Mr. Alexander explained that efforts will be made to tackle some issues in the short term as “some people are living in some bad conditions that need to be addressed.” Perhaps optimistically, the VIHA head replied “yes” to Senator DeGraff’s question on whether the over 2000 outstanding work orders could be completed by the end of March.

VIHA is banking on having a steady supply of materials and sticking to a 2-3 day industry standard timeframe for each work order, tackling several reports simultaneously. But for Senator Marvin Blyden, that estimation was a “heavy lift,” especially as Mr. Alexander himself had indicated that he was unaware of the exact nature of the work to be done. “Some work orders take five minutes... some take two hours.”

The new VIHA executive director has promised to “look at them and determine the deficiencies.”