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# VIHFA Having Difficulty Transitioning People From Emergency Homes: "We Get backlash All Over"

**Transitioning from emergency housing to self-sufficiency remains a contentious issue**

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**VIHFA's interim executive director Dayna Clendinen** By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

Officials from the V.I. Housing Finance Authority have assured lawmakers that they are working diligently to make emergency housing available to those who need it most. VIHFA representatives were responding to concerns raised by senators on the Committee on Housing, Transportation and Telecommunications, which met on Wednesday.

"It's my understanding that we have individuals in emergency housing in the territory since Hurricane Hugo," said Senator Donna Frett-Gregory.

The Virgin Islands, like several stateside communities, is facing a housing crisis, with hundreds of residents on waitlists for public housing. Against this backdrop, Frett-Gregory asked, “can it be emergency housing if people are allowed to live in those ... temporary homes forever?”

The lawmaker also asked for clarity on the length of time a family or individual was allowed to remain in emergency housing, and whether VIHFA was responsible for helping them move into their own home. Stephanie Berry, VIHFA’s chief operating officer confirmed that they are “attempting to address the issues.”

VIHFA’s ongoing efforts include ensuring that individuals in emergency housing undergo “recertifications every six months” to assess whether they still qualify for that support service. As several may no longer be eligible, Berry explained that the authority will “support them in becoming self-sustaining and relocating.”

“We are doing our best to support the transition,” she said. VIHFA says 23 residents in the emergency housing program territory-wide are considered long-term, having been there before 2019. However according to Berry, efforts to move must be demonstrated by residents for them to even qualify for extended time in emergency housing. “We’re not in the practice of displacing someone, but we do want to make sure that they’re doing what they can in addition to what we’re helping them to do in order to get relocated,” she said.

Senator Diane Capeheart would later raise concerns over VIHFA’s reclassification model. She recounted an ongoing challenge with an elderly constituent residing in Campo Rico who she says is no longer eligible for emergency housing “based on her income.” Ms. Capehart bemoaned that “a lot of these individuals now have to find private homes that they can’t even afford.”

VIHFA’s interim executive director Dayna Clendinen attempted to provide comfort to those concerned. At the Campo Rico emergency housing in St. Croix, funds will be used to repair one of the buildings by the second quarter of 2024. Ms. Berry, too, affirmed that “we’re not displacing those individuals. We’re just going to move them around while we do the renovations.”

Any notions that eligibility was income-based were quickly quashed by Ms. Clendinen, who said that the criteria was the nature of the person’s circumstances. “What is the emergency? Is it domestic violence? Is there...some disaster or fire?” She confirmed previous observations that “folks have been living there for quite some time,” but attempts by VIHFA to move individuals out are often faced with resistance. “We get the backlash from the public, the Senate, all over.”

Ms. Berry encapsulated the difficulty being faced by the agency in trying to transition people out of emergency housing. “I want to be diplomatic in what I’m saying but ... it is very difficult for someone who is accustomed to a certain income or required rental income...to transition to getting into a more aggressive environment of seeking more sustainable housing.”

Agency officials, Ms. Berry says, “have tried our best and we will continue to try...but we can only do so much.”