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More Than Two Years After Irma and Maria, Feds Approve School Construction Standards for Resiliency for New VI Schools

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The original Arthur A. Richards Junior High School following Hurricane Maria in 2017 on St. Croix. By. IRENE ALI/IRENE ALI PHOTOGRAPHY

Two years and five months after Hurricanes Irma and Maria shredded Virgin Islands schoolhouses, the territory's sweeping school construction initiative is slowly inching forward.

The Office of Disaster Recovery and school officials Monday announced that FEMA has approved the territory's school construction standards that will ensure new schools and government buildings can withstand future storms and meet the prevailing professional norms for the classroom and government services.

"This approval will green-light pending projects and signals continued progress ..." said Adrienne L. Williams-Octalien, director of the Office of Disaster Recovery.

"We have been anticipating, waiting and looking forward to new schools in our territory for quite some time now," said Department of Education Commissioner Racquel Berry-Benjamin. "We have created a model that will serve as the foundation for all new schools in our territory."

For the first time in the VI Department of Education's history, the department has produced school construction standards that align with prevailing industry norms. The school construction standards govern virtually every aspects of construction — from classroom sizes to the type of lighting used throughout school campuses.

Some six months ago, Government House declared a state of public exigency for the Department of Education when school officials discovered the extremely unsafe conditions students and teachers were expected to encounter when the new school year began at Charlotte Amalie High School (CAHS).

Two-thirds of the school was condemned and closed off to students and staff. Adelita Cancryn Elementary was condemned because of storm damage.

The exigency declaration helped to expedite emergency, short-term repairs at the CAHS, which had been damaged by the 2017 storms, but also suffered from much longer-term neglect of maintenance and upkeep.

In January, during his State of the State speech, Gov. Albert Bryan announced the future demolition of CAHS and the original campus of the Arthur A. Richards Jr. High School. The governor also said at the time that Evelyn M. Williams Elementary School would become the new site of the Arthur A. Richards K-8 School.

These are among the new schools and other government buildings that will fall under new industry standards for construction.

Industry standards are produced by recognized formal organizations, government agencies, trade groups, industry associations, professional societies, and standards producers. Industry standards for health, roads, communication, and fire services were approved in 2019.

FEMA Federal Coordinating Officer William Vogel said, "We will continue to work with the Territory to ensure we build back stronger, safer, and more resilient."

These guidelines will allow for the construction and purchase of equipment at current industry standards as opposed to refurbishing old equipment or rebuilding it to its condition before the storms. Administrators can purchase necessary equipment in accordance with existing guidelines guaranteeing that new facilities will be modernized and up to code. Contractors can build to the most recent regulations ensuring a more resilient structure designed to reflect the expectations set forth for each industry.

Dr. Dionne Wells-Hedrington, Department of Education chief operations officer who spearheads the Department's effort to construct new schools in the territory, said, "Today is a very good day for the Department of Education. ... This is going to be a reality; we are going to rebuild schools."

These approvals granted under Section 428 of the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and the Emergency Assistance Act (Stafford Act) and Section 20601 of the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018

(BBA) authorizes FEMA to aid in the restoration of disaster-damaged components of a facility or system to industry standards without regard to its pre-disaster condition.

With the newly approved industry standards, the New School Construction Advisory Board will continue to move forward with developing the design of new educational facilities in conjunction with the DLR Group; the architectural consultants procured to assist with the reconstruction of public school facilities in the territory.

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