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Leadership Transition at VIHFA: Eugene Jones Jr. Outlines Vision

Drawing on decades of experience, Eugene Jones Jr. plans to leverage his extensive background in housing authority leadership to innovate and collaborate for the future of VIHFA

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Eugene Jones Jr.

After approximately three weeks on the job, the V.I. Housing Finance Authority's new executive director Eugene Jones Jr. is still adjusting to the contours of his new assignment.

As such, during his conversation with the Consortium as he made his initial press rounds, Jones was less interested in discussing the specifics of the job, preferring instead to emphasize his philosophy on leadership and his approach to managing institutions such as the VIHFA.

A former auditor for the HUD Office of the Inspector General, Mr. Jones said he transitioned into working in housing authorities after growing weary of the constant traveling his job as an auditor required. He recounted returning to San Francisco in the mid-1980s after an assignment in Las Vegas and being unable to find his house. "It took me probably three hours to find out where I lived down in the East Bay," he remarked, noting that this was when he decided on a career that could offer more stability.

His first role in the field was as chief financial officer for the San Francisco Housing Authority, but "finance was very boring," Mr. Jones said. He began searching for a role that would provide a greater connection with people in the community, and after four years in San Francisco, he moved to Kansas City, Missouri, to serve as executive director of the first housing authority to come under federal receivership. "It was an opportunity to use my skills...to see if we can turn around the agency," Mr. Jones said, noting that he was able to stabilize the distressed housing authority within approximately two years.

After his stint in Kansas City, MO, Mr. Jones went on to lead housing authorities in Indianapolis, Detroit, Toronto, Chicago and Atlanta. What makes the Virgin Islands unique, he says, is the topography of each of the islands. "St. Thomas and St. John are very, very hilly, [with] a lot of different types of soil to break ground. St. Croix is flat, you can do a lot more things on a flat surface." The terrain and other challenges will require him to adopt a new approach, requiring innovation and intense collaboration with local partners. "I'm excited about that opportunity," Mr. Jones disclosed.

He will not be completely out of his depth in this new environment, however. Mr. Jones has led housing authorities and agencies through major natural disasters, including coordinating relocation services in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina in 2005. "I see the plight of people who have no idea where they're gonna go, where they're going to live," said Mr. Jones, commenting on Virgin Islanders' unique resilience displayed in recovery after major hurricanes.

Asked to identify his immediate priorities as it relates to the VIHFA, Mr. Jones demurred. "I'm still in the learning and listening stage," he declared. However, he differentiated the agency from some of his more troubled past projects. "I do want to recognize that the Authority is in a good place," he said. "I'm only here to build on that success." He pointed to the agency's homeowner assistance funds program as an example of a "fantastic initiative" from VIHFA.

His assessment of the VIHFA as being in good shape was not swayed by the reminder that just this week, it was disclosed that the agency owed millions of dollars to the Water and Power Authority in unpaid utility bills. "There's always two sides of the story, and I'll leave it at that," Mr. Jones declared, before saying that the VIHFA continued to work with WAPA on "some of the outstanding issues" that reportedly relate to change orders that are currently in dispute or under question. The changes made have to be evaluated for compliance with federal rules and regulations, and if they are found not to be in compliance, "it places millions of dollars in federal funds at risk of recapture." That eventuality would not just be harmful to WAPA, Mr. Jones argued, but to the territory as a whole. The two entities have been meeting regularly on the issue, the VIFHA head said. "We're gonna sit down and reconcile that and what we owe them we're gonna pay."

His goal is to ensure greater transparency when it comes to operations, pushing VIHFA updates through social media as well as more traditional press channels. Mr. Jones teased an upcoming "one-stop opportunity" for homeownership that would be coming to St. Croix and St. Thomas in June. He also suggested that the authority is keen to engage the community for ideas on how to

move forward. “Do we do corrugated houses, do we do container houses, do we do modular housing,” he suggested as questions for the public to contemplate. Residents must get involved in conversations about what shape affordable housing is going to take in the years to come. Mr. Jones suggested looking at models that combine uses, such as putting commercial space together with housing, “such as the things that we do all the time stateside – having a Target store on the bottom and having housing on top,” he described as an example.

Throughout the conversation, Mr. Jones reiterated an approach that was open to learning the unique contours of this new assignment, and figuring out ways to harness the resources available to him to achieve the goals of the VIHFA on behalf of the people of the Virgin Islands. Rather than his skill in auditing or fiscal management, the key to his success, Mr. Jones said, will be his ability to remain grounded. In order to accomplish his objectives, Mr. Jones has learned that it is necessary “to be humble, you have to be genuine, and you have to have good people skills.”

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