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Emergency Shelters Identified and Shelf-Stable Foods Procured As USVI Prepares for Hurricane Season

Strategic planning session discusses readiness, FEMA support, and public safety ahead of predicted severe weather

Hurricane Season / **Published On June 12, 2024 05:35 AM /**

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Storm damage in St. Thomas during the passage of Hurricane Irma in 2017. By. VI CONSORTIUM

While the government of the Virgin Islands works to [prepare billion-dollar bid packages](#) for hurricane recovery projects dating back to 2017, residents are preparing for what forecasters say will be an above-normal 2024 Atlantic hurricane season, with the possibility of four to seven systems developing into major Category 3 to 5 hurricanes. On Wednesday, Senator Kenneth Gittens convened a meeting of the Committee on Homeland Security, Justice and Public Affairs to discuss ongoing efforts and plans. The discussion was led by Daryl Jaschen, director of the V.I.

Territorial Emergency Management Agency, who emphasized the importance of timely planning.

Recalling experiences from the 2017 hurricanes, Mr. Jaschen lamented the sense of “procrastination [and] complacency with our own individuals in the territory, not thinking it’s going to happen.” He referenced the devastating impact of the storms and encouraged residents to take the season seriously. “We don’t want it, but we want to be prepared,” he said. Consideration for senior citizens, availability of medication, and caring for pets should all be top of mind he advised.

For VITEMA, a major difference in preparatory efforts now and seven years ago is that this year, the Federal Emergency Management Agency has already sent shelf-stable water and meals “sufficient enough to support 10 days” to the territory. It’s a “marked change from how conditions were in 2017 where all the FEMA commodities, to include temporary power generators, were kept in Puerto Rico,” the VITEMA director explained.?

If needed, the food supplies can be distributed within the territory at various points of distribution (PODs), “starting five days following the federal hurricane major disaster declaration.” Virgin Islanders are encouraged to stock at least five days’ worth of food in their own personal emergency stash, as in the event of a disaster, food distribution would not be immediate. If necessary this hurricane season, VITEMA will operate two PODs per district that each can distribute up to 5,000 meals a day. Once up and running, the distribution sites will operate until “food supply chains are restored” and ATMs are functional. Individuals would be able to receive two meals per day and three liters of water for the same period.

The required 5-day lead time is a result of VITEMA not having immediate access to the food supplies. They must first be shipped over by FEMA, signed for by VITEMA’s director, and then broken down by the National Guard. “Don’t be coming up after the storm and saying, ‘Where’s my food and water?’ There is none,” Mr. Jaschen warned. “It’s going to take five days before I open a POD up unless Governor Bryan tells me to do it quicker.” Roads must also be clear and open before the distribution sites can function, he added.

The location for the PODs has not yet been decided by VITEMA, something that legislators found concerning. Senator Kenneth Gittens contended that “it will be much easier for you and for those in need” if locations are disclosed well ahead of time. “During an emergency, information hardly gets out.” However, Mr. Jaschen explained that the ultimate location of a POD would be determined by nature. He reminded the lawmakers that “assessments have to be done.”

The V.I. Department of Human Services is also working to prepare for the potential impact of a devastating hurricane. According to Community Affairs Coordinator Yvette Henry, Key among their efforts are preparing emergency shelters for use. To date, the department has conducted inspections of evacuation shelters with the help of FEMA, the American Red Cross and local partners. Shelters already identified in St. Croix include the St. Croix Educational Complex and the David C. Canageta Recreational Complex. In St. Thomas, the Ivanna Eudora Kean High School’s gym and cafeteria as well as the Lockhart Elementary and Junior High School have been determined to be suitable. In St. John, the Adrian Senior Center and the Gift Hill School are emergency shelters. There is no listed shelter for Water Island for 2024.

?Along with the V.I. Department of Health, DHS is ensuring shelters are “adequately prepared to meet the unique needs of our vulnerable population during emergencies,” stated Ms. Henry. Accommodations will be made for service animals so “those who rely on them are not separated during emergencies.”

DHS also is working on identifying more shelters, and lawmakers have encouraged pinning down locations that are easily accessible for residents, no matter their geographic location. “The two emergency shelter locations are more so on the eastern end of the [St. Thomas],” Mr. Gittens observed.

Meanwhile, much of the V.I. Department of Public Works’ efforts will focus on clearing ghuts, ensuring a free flow of stormwater, pruning trees, distributing sandbags, clearing public routes, and restoring infrastructure. According to Assistant Labor Commissioner Rueben Jennings, DPW can also assist in distributing supplies if needed. Lawmakers encouraged continued prioritization of drain maintenance, as several areas in the territory are regularly flooded. Additionally, debris dislodged by heavy rains often clogs ghuts. “The department has begun assessing the stormwater drainage system and will continue to do so throughout the hurricane season,” noted Mr. Jennings.