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Wood Rotting, Hope Fading: Seven Years of Unmet Promises from EnVision Tomorrow

Following the federal indictment alleging that Charlemagne, his wife, and Richardson profited from storing disaster relief wood while the gov't failed to use it for repairs, we spoke to the residents who have been most affected

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Lumber has been sitting unused at the abandoned Alexander Henderson Elementary School since August 2021. Previously, it was stored behind the Sunshine Mall in Frederiksted. By. TSEHAI ALFRED, V.I. CONSORTIUM

After Hurricanes Irma and Maria lifted St. Croix resident Earla Carol McKnight's roof, seeping inches of water into her home, she "thanked god that it didn't come off" and took in neighbors

whose roofs did. Now, seven years later, she says some of those neighbors have moved to the mainland after waiting for government-assisted repairs to their homes that never came. Ms. McKnight, however, continues to wait— living in a home where the lifted roof has raised her tiles, creating mold and dust that have made her ill, and the windows remain boarded up year-round because if another hurricane comes they'll "blow out."

But personally repairing these damages would disqualify Ms. McKnight from EnVision Tomorrow, a Virgin Islands Housing Finance Authority rebuilding program—financed with federal disaster relief funds—which she applied for in 2018. Living with the years-old damages and their effects is just one of the many inconveniences residents say they have faced with the program. Over its nearly six years, only 30 homes damaged by the 2017 hurricanes have been repaired. To date, 580 homes in the program have yet to be repaired. According to a [recent federal indictment](#), while residents waited years for vital reconstruction, David Charlemagne, his wife, and former VIHFA Chief Operating Officer Darin Richardson allegedly profited by storing and managing disaster relief lumber intended for the reconstruction program, rather than using it for repairs.

"I'm so glad that somebody finally got them," Ms. McKnight said in an interview with the Consortium, describing her reaction to the indictment. The charges—government program fraud, wire fraud, and money laundering conspiracy— stem from a two-year federal investigation into the \$4.4 million contract that VIHFA awarded to Mr. Charlemagne for "storage" and "management" of the lumber. Mr. Charlemagne was awarded the contract through his company, D&S Trucking, allowing him to allegedly collect vastly inflated annual fees for storing and managing the wood rent-free at the now-abandoned Alexander Henderson Elementary School, property of the V.I. Department of Education, where he was employed as the director of maintenance.

Hundreds of the woodpiles still remain at the school—larger moldy and likely unusable—although, when the program launched, officials claimed it would be covered with tarps. Janelle Sarauw—the former senator who lobbied in Congress for the territory's \$8 billion federal relief funding and who chaired the Committee on Disaster Recovery, Infrastructure, and Planning— said she long questioned the unused wood. "I did have my foot on their neck for lack of a better word," Ms. Sarauw said in an interview with the Consortium. During her time on the Committee, Ms. Sarauw said she raised concerns about the small number of rebuilds while administrative costs continued to dent the program's funding. She said she was also skeptical of the mandate that applicants to the program could not make any personal home repairs, which she said was not a federal mandate but a caveat added locally by the VIHFA.?

Residents in the program described raising similar concerns but were often told that the lack of progress was because of issues with contractors. One St. John resident, who asked for his name not to be disclosed, said that after his home was destroyed in 2017, he applied for Envision in 2018 but did not receive an inspection—an early step in the repair process—until 2020. Several months later however—after receiving no updates and little communication from the program—the same inspection was done again because "the original inspectors quit and never turned in their paperwork," further delaying the process. Ms. McKnight, the St. Croix resident, also described a lack of communication from the program. "I have to be reaching out to them all the time," Ms. McKnight said.

In a statement to the Consortium, the Office of Disaster Recovery wrote, "To date, the ODR has provided updates to 147 applicants, and the program expects to contact all eligible applicants by

the end of the year.” According to the statement, 433 of the homes in the program pending repair would therefore not have received any updates from Envision.

For the St. John resident, although the program informed him in 2023 that he was ineligible due to “duplication of benefits,” the question still remained— “where is the money going?”

“You could have told me about this at step one,” the resident said, describing how he learned that he was ineligible four years into the program, leaving him to question the administrative costs spent over those four years and wonder how that money and time could have been used for repairs instead. “We live in a place where there's a lot of difficulties with WAPA and inconveniences of getting things shipped here, and things like that. So that's one thing, but then to have this carrot dangled in front of you, as well, and then you just never reach it. That's a whole new level of frustration,” the resident said.



Lumber sitting unused at the abandoned Alexander Henderson Elementary School since August 2021. Before that, the material was stored behind the Sunshine Mall in Frederiksted after being provided to the local government by the U.S. Dept. of Housing and Urban Development following the devastating storms of 2017. (Photos taken on June 17, 2024) (Credit: Tsehai Alfred, V.I. Consortium)

?Echoing the sentiment, Ms. McKnight also said that the continued wait for repairs is particularly frustrating after enduring other government-inflicted stress. “I’m just getting over this health thing with my dad. I’m just getting over it. I’m just getting over the water business where we’re finally getting water free again with my sister and getting oil in it,” Ms. McKnight said. Ms. McKnight’s home was also a victim of the 2021 Limetree refinery [massive flare](#) that sent plumes of smoke mixed with oil droplets westward, which contaminated residents’ cisterns. Although she says she will “keep nagging” the program until her home is repaired, her past experiences with government programs as well as the charges against the Charlemagne and Mr. Richardson, have created significant distrust in the repairs ever materializing.

While the two residents who spoke to the Consortium said they would like to see greater accountability following the indictment and their festering distrust, Ms. Sarauw said she believes that the V.I. Legislature should take action and consider introducing legislation to restructure the VIHFA. According to former senator, the entire system that distributes disaster relief funds, which

includes VITEMA, ODR, VIHFA, and even WAPA, is in need of restructuring. “It's really hard to keep track. It’s really ripe for corruption,” she said.

In a [video posted on Facebook](#) by the VIHFA in 2023, titled “You've got questions? We've got answers about our EnVision program from the team behind the scenes”, two officials assured viewers that they were in compliance with federal regulations. During the dialogue, the interim executive director at the time, Dayna Clendinen, asked the senior program manager of Envision, “We’re compliant, aren’t we?” to which he replied, “of course we are.”



Photos taken on June 17, 2024 (Tsehai Alfred, V.I. Consortium)

Ms. McKnight commented on the video in 2023 that she had been waiting on assessments in order to sign the grant for construction for two years. Although architects and contractors visited her home in April of this year, saying they would then call her to sign the grant, she has yet to receive the call. However, according to a statement from the VIHFA’s communications manager, Monee’ Edwards, “35 homes are scheduled to begin construction in June, 39 homes are expected to start in July, and an additional 26 homes are projected to begin in August.”

Ms. McKnight expressed her frustration, stating that she “can't wait another year for it to be like this again.” Her concerns stem from the inability to entertain friends at her home due to the hazardous tiles and the inability to repaint because of potential repairs. Despite these challenges, she does not want to leave the island. “Sometimes I say, just pick up and go, but then I say, go where?” Ms. McKnight said. “St. Croix is my home.”