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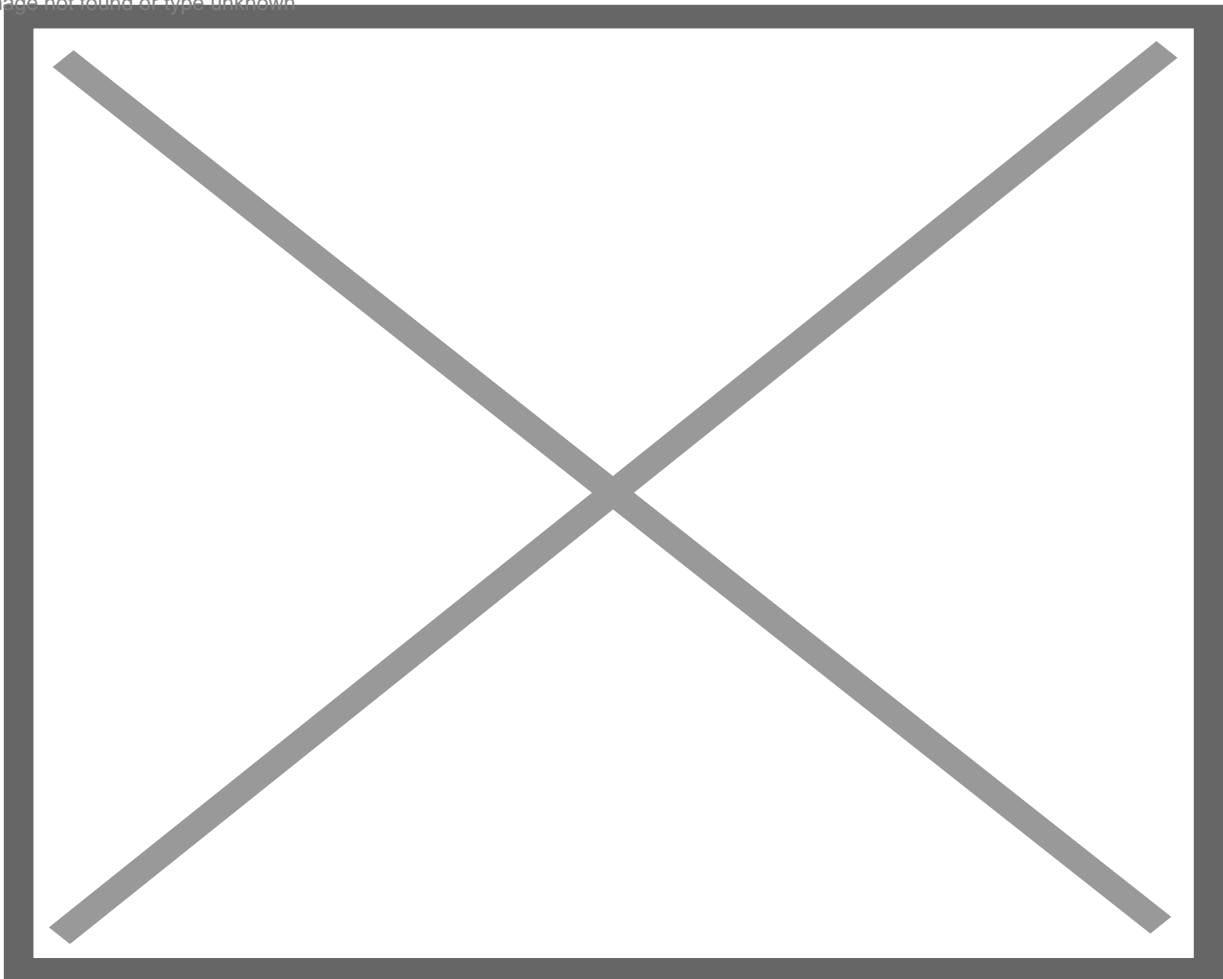
Senators Urge ODR to Expedite Use of \$235 Million in EnVision Tomorrow Funds Before 2026 Deadline

ODR is urged to effectively utilize the remaining \$235 million in EnVision Tomorrow funds by the 2026 federal deadline, aiming to alleviate the prolonged housing challenges in the U.S. Virgin Islands

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The Office of Disaster Recovery (ODR) is struggling to progress with the EnVISION Tomorrow program, having completed only 35 of the eligible homes as of July 2024, despite the program opening for applications over four years ago.

On Monday, ODR's director Adrienne Williams-Octalien provided an update on territorial disaster recovery projects before the Committee on Disaster Recovery, Infrastructure, and Planning. "Significant resources have been dedicated to moving the long-delayed EnVISION Tomorrow Home Repair and Reconstruction program forward," she testified. There are currently

27 homes in construction, while another 44 homes are pending contract awards. ODR anticipates that during 2025, an additional 200 homes will be under construction.

Now over 4 years since the EnVIision Tomorrow program opened for applications, ODR said it recognizes the need to verify that applicants are still interested. To do so, the office will administer a survey to “ensure that we have current contact information.” Outside of conducting the survey, ODR wants to strengthen existing lines of communication with applicants. “We have found that over 40% of the people who come to the top of the list are slow to respond with documents or indicate they are not ready to relocate so that their homes can be fixed,” she explained.

According to Ms. Williams-Octalien, this negatively impacts ODR’s “ability to maintain pricing with the contractors once bids are awarded.” She has therefore encouraged applicants to “prioritize returning the interest survey.” ODR said it is aware that some applicants were no longer willing to wait, and repaired their homes themselves. “We’re going through the process of trying to identify what that real number is.” Approximately 600 households originally sought assistance.

According to Ms. Williams-Octalien, ODR also wants to “readily identify individuals who are displaced, disabled or living in dire conditions to provide assistance.” She said the Office is aware that some individuals who applied for assistance through the program are struggling to “legally identify home ownership and heirship.” However, “proof of ownership is a regulatory requirement and limits the types of considerations that can be made,” says ODR.

She said though ODR prides itself on the progress made so far and continues to share ambitious milestones, the Office only has until 2026 to expend the funds earmarked for the program or request an extension. There is \$235 million left to be expended.

“I think we need to start putting in for that extension because there’s no way I can see we’re going to complete it,” contended Sen. Franklin Johnson. He referenced the number of families that continue to complain to him. “I saw someone just put a new blue tarp on their roof because the rain is just soaking down in these homes,” he told the ODR director. “I’m very disappointed in the progress of this and 2026 is around the corner, so I pray that we don’t lose that money.”

Sen. Marise James, too, was displeased with the program’s implementation rate. “The only reason we have this money is because we need to help people,” she observed. Issuing advice to ODR, she encouraged Ms. Williams-Octalien to meet people where they are. She referenced the portion of the director’s testimony where she explained some applicants do not present documentation promptly or are unprepared to relocate while work takes place on their homes. For Ms. James, meeting applicants where they are involves “respecting their circumstances and working with them according to their physical and mental limitations... It seems to me as if we don’t know the people we are serving.”

Sen. Milton Potter also came to the defense of applicants. He noted that there are “emotional issues” attached to “having a home that has been destroyed... Sometimes your response isn’t as timely. Sometimes you don’t have the wherewithal.” He suggested that there are also instances where there is no one in the home who understands the processes for submitting documentation.

Ms. Williams-Octalien said her staff is doing all within their power to assist applicants. “We’re reaching out to them. We want to make sure they’re ready to move.” ODR said it is also working to increase staff to work on “the applications that we have right now.” A new housing specialist started on Monday.

Ms. Williams-Octalien told lawmakers that the Office is also considering ways to assist individuals who may need to be relocated for reconstruction work to begin, particularly the elderly. It was a bone of contention for Sen. Kenneth Gittens. “We need to do everything possible, move whatever mountain we need to move, to make sure that we take care of our elderly.” He was buoyed by Ms. Octalien’s response that her office was in the process of “developing that policy and procedure...so we can help the elderly.”

Despite the mountain of concerns from legislators, ODR remains confident. “I have a line of sight on 71 homes to be issued this month,” said the director, assuring senators that her office could meet the 100 home target by the end of 2024.

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