

## DHS Faces Meals on Wheels Funding Crisis, 72 Vacancies, and Growing Elderly Homelessness

**\$300,000 needed to clear Meals on Wheels waitlist; 15 elderly patients await placement in overburdened hospitals due to staffing shortages and insufficient resources**

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“Until we get serious about really going through this government and cutting the fat and shifting monies into agencies where they need to go, we’re going to be having these types of conversations,” said Senator Alma Francis Heyliger, after learning of concerning issues detailed during the V.I. Department of Human Services’ FY2025 budget request presentation Tuesday.

Lawmakers on the Senate Committee of Budget, Appropriations and Finance listened as DHS officials outlined a host of challenges with various programs, generally due to insufficient funding. “The Department has been especially plagued with a large wait list for the elderly

nutrition program,” revealed Averil George, DHS commissioner. Commonly referred to as Meals on Wheels, the program has served over 140,000 meals in the last year, with a wait list of 77 individuals in St. Croix and 20 on St. Thomas. There is no waitlist in St. John. “The Department has estimated that \$300,000 is required to clear this remaining waitlist,” noted Ms. Averil. Later in the discussion, she told Senator Marvin Blyden that this sum was not included in the department’s FY2025 budget request.

DHS is also struggling with “the growing wait list for entry into [elderly] homes due to the inability to sustain an increased capacity in the current state,” Ms. George told lawmakers. “The waitlist for the homes continues to grow every day.” Among those awaiting placement are roughly 15 “boarders” who are currently housed in the territory’s hospitals. “The department is plagued with limited physical and human resource capacity within our homes, and limited funding to increase our off-Island capacity,” lamented the commissioner. Nonetheless, she told lawmakers that DHS is “exploring every avenue to address this chronic issue.”

Among the laundry list of challenges are staff shortages and difficulty filling vacant positions including posts for social workers. “The plan to increase staffing is to get the funding. We don’t have a problem finding individuals in the community,” Ms. George explained. DHS is also contending with aging facilities, including homes for the elderly. Lawmakers, too, were reminded of the delays in processing Medicaid benefits, and the recent funding request. It became apparent that DHS will also need more money for the Medicaid program in FY2025.

DHS is also facing difficulties in releasing payments to various non-profits but has testified to working with the Department of Finance to speed up the process. “If we’re not paying our non-profits, then how are we serving our community?” Senator Donna Frett-Gregory wondered. According to Ms. George, these entities will be placed on a critical list, separate from other pending vendor payments.

For FY2025, the Department of Human Services is requesting \$68,287,052 in general fund appropriations, including \$625,000 in miscellaneous appropriations. Noting the department’s challenges, Ms. George told lawmakers that “this sum represents an adequate allocation that will require careful management.” She pledged DHS’s commitment to “prioritizing critical programs” for the territory’s most vulnerable. The department anticipates receiving \$205,259,625 in federal funding, making the total FY2025 budget \$276,133,058. Despite Ms. George’s characterization of the budget as “adequate”, it is a 7 percent reduction from the previous year’s sum, which already was proven insufficient to meet the agency’s needs.

The commissioner detailed the department’s budget breakdown which includes \$19,929,312 for personnel, \$9,904,702 for fringe benefits, \$1,234,537 for supplies, \$94,000 for capital projects, \$34,754,491 for other services, and \$2.3 million. She told lawmakers that while a lump sum allocation of \$1,651,173 for vacancies was appreciated, it was “not sufficient enough to address the agency’s personnel needs.” There are currently 72 vacancies at DHS.

The funding and staffing challenges faced by DHS were not taken lightly. Ms. Frett-Gregory remarked that “the work that you do is critically important to the Virgin Islands, but it’s not reflective of what came down in the 2025 budget book.” She encouraged Ms. George to dialogue with the Office of Management and Budget “if you are not getting the satisfaction that you feel that you should be getting.”

DHS joins a long line of government entities that have expressed a need for additional funding. Reports of a \$91 million revenue deficit for FY2024, though, have left lawmakers hesitant to support budget increases. The Finance chair announced that the Legislature had yet to receive an

updated report from the Department of Finance to inform them of the territory's fiscal status.

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