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Senior Services Suffer as Budget Cuts and Staffing Shortages Hit DHS Program

In a passionate appeal, Senator Carrion highlights the dire state of the Herbert Grigg Home for the Aged, calling the conditions "unacceptable" as DHS battles budget cuts and supply chain issues affecting senior services

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Nelcia Charlemagne **August 31, 2024**

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The entrance of the Herbert Grigg Home for the Aged facility on St. Croix. By. ODR

The efficacy of several social services — particularly those intended to benefit senior citizens — is continuously being negatively impacted by deficiencies in funding and staffing, said representatives of the Department of Human Services and Lutheran Social Services of the Virgin Islands.

Speaking before the Committee on Culture, Youth, Aging, Sports, and Parks on Friday, the discussions exposed a reality that deeply disturbed lawmakers. Among the startling revelations made was the current condition of the Herbert Grigg Home for the Aged, which triggered a passionate appeal from Senator Samuel Carrion. Having visited the facility after Ernesto, Mr. Carrion told his colleagues, "I just wanted to cry. The condition of that place: It's unacceptable." He reported that during the storm, "they were without a generator. [The] power left, and the generator didn't work."

For Senator Carrion, "the way that we honor our seniors speaks volumes about a community or a society." He expressed his strong displeasure with budget cuts for FY2025 for the Department of Human Services, which manages the home. "How are we going to cut a budget from a division that is critical?" he asked. "The decisions that are being made at the executive level - it's sad. Every division is not equal," he said, referring to the essential nature of DHS's work. Mr. Carrion accused the Department of Finance of "[finding] money for what they want and who they want." Based on the information he has recently received from employees, the home is still awaiting its allotments for July and August.?

The home's power generation capacity was not the only shortfall identified on Friday. Lawmakers learned that DHS is indeed facing challenges in maintaining stock of crucial supplies including adult diapers and wipes. "It is a daily challenge to make sure that we always have the supplies that we need," admitted Assistant Commissioner Dinelle Baptiste. She contends, however, that money is not the issue in this instance. "We also have supply chain issues...we are waiting months at a time to be able to receive it," she shared, explaining that DHS works with "limited vendors" to procure supplies. "Often, we're having to literally go out to KMart or local businesses to purchase these items," she told a bewildered Senator Franklin Johnson.?

Meanwhile, issues with the Meals on Wheels program persist, despite a recent appropriation by the Legislature to clear the program's lengthy waitlist. In St. Croix, the waitlist comprises 67 people. Despite the recent injection of funding, said Assistant Commissioner Baptiste, DHS could not use the money to "purchase vehicles, which is a primary challenge, nor did it allow for enough sufficient time to be able to hire personnel before the end of the fiscal year to achieve the goal."

DHS is also working to correct difficulties associated with the Meals on Wheels program in St. John, where the current supplier has allegedly left much to be desired. "There are some deep concerns with the current entity that provides the service," reminded Senator Angel Bolques. DHS "shares those concerns" and is being proactive in reaching out to various providers." In the interim, Ms. Baptiste says the department is in dialogue with the current provider "to ensure that we don't continue to see some of the issues that we've been seeing."

Nonetheless, she assured the committee that DHS "continues efforts as usual to address the wait list as best as possible." According to Ms. Baptiste, the department hopes that "additional funding can be provided in the new fiscal year for both personnel and vehicles to address the current wait list in its entirety."

More money will also be necessary to bolster the Adult Protective Services unit. "This program is severely understaffed...and [is] challenged with addressing the needs of this vulnerable community," Ms. Baptiste reported. With only four staff members on St. Croix and three on St. Thomas, personnel is stretched thin when investigating suspected cases of abuse, neglect and financial exploitation. To hire additional staff and cover additional needs, the program could require up to \$400,000 to \$500,000 more, Ms. Baptiste declared.?

While DHS continues to identify ways to juggle financial and personnel shortfalls in the programs it manages, it must also work to create a safe work environment for staff operating out of the Knud Hansen Complex. Earmarked for a complete rebuild, DHS does not currently have a timeline within which staff will be relocated from the mold-infested building, further compromised by Ernesto.

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