

Council on Homelessness Fails to Meet Mandate Since Reestablishment

The Council has not met since 2022 after being revived in 2019, leaving critical issues unresolved; lawmakers express frustration over exclusion from meetings, while council members push for codification to ensure future accountability and continuity

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The codification of the Virgin Islands Council on Homelessness (VICH) into law is a critical step in working toward ending homelessness in the territory, said Dan Derima, chair of the Virgin Islands Continuum of Care on Homelessness. His comments come as lawmakers express concern that the council — first established under the Turnbull administration, revived via another executive order under Governor John deJongh, and reestablished by Governor Albert Bryan in 2019 — is far from meeting its mandate of ridding the territory of homelessness and poverty.

But once the council moves from executive order status into actual law, its staying power will mean greater accountability and continuity, ensuring that the efforts to combat homelessness are sustained across different administrations and that agencies involved are more formally obligated to carry out their responsibilities, contended Mr. Derima.

He made that assertion during this week's meeting of the Senate Committee on Housing, Transportation, and Telecommunications, where the discussion focused on ways to provide temporary and permanent housing to unhoused Virgin Islanders.

When Governor Bryan reestablished the council, he said it was the "first of many important steps in our administration's efforts to end poverty in the territory....We have a real opportunity to make progress in reducing our homelessness by reducing poverty." Its composition includes representatives from the Office of the Governor, the Housing Finance Authority, the Legislature of the Virgin Islands, the Office of the Attorney General, the hospitals, the Police Department, the Virgin Islands Continuum of Care on Homelessness, the Bureau of Correction and the Departments of Human Services, Health, Labor among others.

VICH was initially established to converge "agencies and organizations that serve the homeless population to coordinate program development and delivery of essential services," Mr. Derima explained. It is intended to serve as "a single territorial resource for homelessness planning and policy development." VICH is also expected to advise both the governor and the Legislature on issues related to homelessness, and must "provide recommendations for cooperative efforts and policy initiatives to carry out programs."

However, it is unclear how much of that work has been done, since according to Mr. Derima, the Council has not met since 2022.

Senator Marvin Blyden, who chairs the Committee on Housing, Transport, and Telecommunications could not recall whether the Legislature was invited to these conversations. "Has the president of the Legislature ever been invited to those meetings of the regenerated Council? Can anyone tell me?" he asked. Receiving confirmation that the Legislature had not been invited to Council meetings despite being a represented entity, Suzanne Magras of the Continuum of Care promised that they "will certainly do so."

While the council as a whole may not have convened in two years, DHS Commissioner Averil George told lawmakers that "the Council's Access to Services Subcommittee has been actively planning for the FY24 hurricane season." She said that they have identified "key service areas, such as daily day shelters, overnight shelters, supply distribution and transportation" to care for homeless people in the event of an emergency.

Monday's meeting, however, revealed that there is much work that must be done. "Codification will ensure that addressing homelessness becomes part of the formal role and responsibility of various agencies," Mr. Derima insisted.