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VI Housing Authority Improves Work Order Rating From F to A, Senators Press for More Progress

VIHA's work order completion rating improved at some sites, but senators raised concerns about unresolved maintenance complaints, lack of staffing, and delays in basic services like exterior lighting.

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Nelcia Charlemagne **March 31, 2025**

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The Louis E. Brown Housing Community on St. Croix, a VIHA property. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

One bright spot amid the clouds of concern surrounding matters discussed during Friday's meeting of the Committee on Housing, Transportation, and Telecommunications was the V.I. Housing Authority's move from an F to an A rating when it comes to completing work orders on some public housing sites. The rating, which does not capture VIHA's overall maintenance score, is based on the Department of Housing and Urban Development's scoring system.

“Going from an F rating to A rating is not an easy job, so I commend you for those efforts,” said Senator Angel Bolques Jr., who pressed Dwayne Alexander, VIHA executive director, for details on how they achieved such a feat.

“We sort of changed our mindset on how we approach managing our properties,” Mr. Alexander said. “We are no longer looking at these properties as typical public housing properties. We're looking more of it as an asset.” Now, said Mr. Alexander, workers are tasked to “manage the asset instead of just fixing up a property.” And while work orders have increased to approximately 5,000, VIHA is “doing a better job tracking,” he said.

According to Mr. Alexander, an increase in public meetings can also be credited for the authority's recent improvement. “We get the feedback from the residents.” Committee chair Senator Marvin Blyden was pleased with that development. “It's very important for you to have those meetings to stay connected with your residents,” he told the VIHA head. Senator Dwayne DeGraff, however, was less impressed by the news of the ratings improvement. “I hope it's not seen as if it's an accomplishment, because to me, it's not. It's the job,” he stated.

I'm sure you have less complaints this year than you had last year,” Mr. Alexander told lawmakers confidently. “The complaints go down because the employees are out there doing the work,” he stated confidently.

“My calls have increased in terms of complaints when it comes to maintenance,” Senator Blyden disclosed. Senator Alma Francis Heyliger, too, has been fielding complaints from residents. “I get quite a bit of phone calls and some are very perplexing to me,” she told Mr. Alexander. According to the lawmaker, callers say they aren't getting traction with requests for “simple things like just light bulbs in areas outside where they traverse.” Senator Francis Heyliger said the situation had become so dire that “I'm to the point where I'm ready to put a handyman on my staff to just go out and put up lights and stuff like that to help out the community.”

Mr. Alexander pushed back. “What I do see sometimes is folks call and they complain about things not being done, and I ask if they put a work order in, they never put the work order in,” he told the St. Thomas lawmaker. Francis Heyliger, however, insisted that she is aware of one constituent who “did exactly what you said, and a problem was never resolved... They showed me the multiple phone calls, and they were still having chunks of concrete fall down.”

Francis Heyliger said that upon her investigations, she learned of an “issue with the lack of maintenance people to go to the different areas.” Mr. Alexander disagreed. “We have never gotten to a point where we cannot do anything in terms of accomplishing some work, based on us not having personnel. So that's not the case.” He promised to exchange contact information with the senator to ensure no issues of that nature cropped up in the future.

The VIHA currently employs 78 maintenance staff, with 31 vacancies for similar positions. Sen. Blyden wanted to know what the authority was doing to attract personnel to these roles. “Those positions [have] been off and on. We may hire two, lose one,” Mr. Alexander replied. Additionally, uncertainty about the stability of federal funding means that VIHA has “been slowing down in terms of hiring those folks... We didn't want to bring people on, not knowing exactly what our funding is.”

Nonetheless, Blyden encouraged the design of a “strategy in terms of onboarding more maintenance staff.” “Once you have a good maintenance crew, timely repairs, you have happy residents. Happy residents pay their rent.”

