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Possible Cuts to School Lunch Program Spur Urgent Calls for Unified Food Aid Response in the Virgin Islands

As the federal shutdown threatens SNAP and possibly school lunches, the V.I. Continuum of Care on Homelessness is urging collaboration among churches, nonprofits, and the private sector to ensure families and children do not go hungry in the weeks ahead.

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A thought that federally funded school lunch programs may be next on the chopping block after SNAP benefits prompted calls for community action on food aid distribution from members of the Virgin Islands Continuum of Care on Homelessness.

The prospect of the ongoing federal government shutdown affecting school lunch was raised by Cira Burke from the V.I. Department of Human Services, who said that she was recently in contact with education officials who discussed the possibility. “This is very disheartening because we who live in this community understand that school lunch, many times, is pretty much the only meal that a lot of our children get,” she noted. “If it's something that is being discussed...we have to prepare ourselves for that,” she suggested.

CoC Secretary Suzanne Magras agreed. “This has really been weighing heavily on my mind,” she said. Noting that at least one church is currently sponsoring a food drive, with efforts by a grassroots collective to do the same. With government officials already advising food benefit recipients to “really stretch their dollars” due to the lack of federal funding for SNAP, she was anxious to find out whether there were any efforts for food aid distribution from the private sector or private citizens, particularly on St. Thomas.

Burke said that at least one other organization had reached out “to possibly engage in the food drive,” but said DHS was “open and receptive to partnering up with any agency that is willing to help.” Disclosing that “on average, it runs us like \$6 million a month for full benefits,” she expressed gratitude that for November, “at least half of the benefits will be issued,” thanks to Government House.

As DHS Commissioner Averil George noted, “Governor Bryan and the team have agreed to pay half of the SNAP benefits to our recipients.” Currently, the Department of Finance and Office of Management and Budget are working with DHS “in regards to getting our SNAP recipients checks that they can get [at least half of their allotments](#) so they can start shopping for November.”

Should the shutdown last longer than November 15, however, “we're circling back with Governor Bryan and the team to see if we can do anything else for the rest of November,” said Commissioner George. She noted that DHS officials would also “be meeting with the senators” ahead of their efforts to allocate temporary funding to meet the territory's SNAP needs.

The current situation has already impacted the territory's charitable organizations, disclosed the representative for Catholic Charities. Apart from their ongoing food assistance efforts, requests for rent and utility assistance have increased, she said. The shutdown is only the latest withdrawal of federal funds from the space, she noted, citing earlier cuts to grants and other funding sources. The number of Virgin Islanders needing assistance to meet their basic needs “is rising already, and we have been seeing it for months now...we have been experiencing cuts and more phone calls coming in on a continuous basis.”

While announcements of other organizations’ annual Thanksgiving food drives were encouraging, one suggestion was to engage the private sector directly to raise awareness and encourage a unified community effort to support the most vulnerable. Ms. Magras emphasized the need to coordinate among all groups involved to prevent overlapping efforts and competition. “It makes sense to combine all those efforts,” she said.