

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Virgin Islands Homelessness Count May Be Undercounting People, Service Providers Warn

The federally required point-in-time count needs earlier planning, better locations, and services that actually draw unhoused people in, as officials work to capture a more accurate picture of homelessness across the territory, officials say.

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With months to go before its scheduled date in January 2027, the Continuum of Care on Homelessness is pushing for earlier planning, more attractive services, and better coordination, all in an attempt to capture a truer picture of homelessness across the territory.

During Friday's meeting, CoC chair Danny Derima urged the group to start planning from now, using available planning grant funds to strengthen the federally mandated point-in-time homeless account.

Salvation Army representative Tom Bolt suggested that the count could be paired with the delivery of services that could draw unhoused people to central locations for a more accurate count. He noted that his organization has recorded some success using this tactic for their own activities.

"You found people that were like a family that's living in their car or couch surfing," said Mr. Bolt. "We need to beat the bushes and count everyone that's out there...from the people living on a boat in Coral Bay in St. John to people in the bush."

Mr. Derima was receptive to the idea, noting that "not everyone wants to admit that they're living in a place not fit for human habitation." A boat could be a habitable home, but if persons are occupying a vessel "but they don't have an engine in it, it doesn't have power, they're homeless."

"It's much worse than the Point in Time Count would indicate," said Mr. Bolt. Mr. Derima agreed.

Sandra Thomas Mason of Catholic Charities, however, suggested that "having meals and having different things that worked before seems like it's not working now." Fewer people were participating in these counts despite the ancillary activities and services that are being planned. There needs to be more thought put into what is being offered, she suggested, to ensure that it aligns with the needs and interests of homeless Virgin Islanders. "That committee needs to really sit down and find ways that we can really attract those homeless individuals to come out and to say something...some of us in the Caribbean are really too proud to say that we need."

Department of Human Services representative Sarah Burke highlighted the success of the Community Day of Caring as an example of the kind of model the point-in-time count could follow. "We had community stakeholders that were there to include the Department of Human Services to enroll individuals for needed benefits. We did have the Department of Health van. We did have the showers. We even had a masseuse to come in and provide massages for individuals that were homeless as well as haircuts," she recounted.

Meanwhile, Catholic Charities Executive Director Andrea Shillingford suggested that the choice of location for the count could play an outsized role in the level of participation from the unhoused population. "The locations that we have been choosing lately, those locations are totally off," she declared. Ms. Burke responded that the services must be provided where the intended recipients are. "If you are there in Market Square, then you're more inclined to be able to get a hold of them." Ultimately, Ms. Burke said, the key will be planning early and together.

The importance of getting an accurate picture of homelessness in the Virgin Islands was underscored by Ann McCready of the Department of Housing and Urban Development. "It is to the community's best interest for HUD to know the truest sense and scope of the issue in your community because that is obviously used for resource allocations," she noted.

