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## VITEMA Grades Hurricane Readiness a B- as Agencies Cite Shelter Staffing, St. John Gaps and WAPA Financial Strain

VITEMA Director Daryl Jaschen said readiness is at a B- despite active interagency planning, with officials citing St. John operational gaps, shelter nurse shortages, unclear distribution roles, hospital continuity needs, and WAPA's limited cash reserves.

Hurricane Season / **Published On July 01, 2026 06:44 AM /**

Nelcia Charlemagne **July 01, 2026**

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A St. John home shows visible damage after Hurricane Irma struck the Virgin Islands in 2017. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM.

One month into the 2026 Atlantic Hurricane Season, emergency management, health, utility, public safety and infrastructure officials told lawmakers Tuesday that the territory has made

preparations for storms, but several unresolved gaps remain in shelter staffing, St. John operations, patient movement, dialysis continuity, supply distribution, communications and WAPA's financial readiness.

The testimony came before the Committee on Disaster Recovery, Infrastructure, and Planning, where department heads and agency representatives discussed their readiness posture and the work still underway.

Among the most significant issues raised was the 2026 Capstone Readiness Initiative. Daryl Jaschen, director of the V.I. Territorial Emergency Management Agency, said the exercise identified several areas needing improvement, including "St. John operational gaps, shelter staff vulnerabilities, points of distribution role confusion, and communication quality."

According to Mr. Jaschen, those failures represent "systematic challenges that require structural correction actions before hurricane season." The hurricane season, however, has already begun.

He also said several of the findings are not new and have been flagged in previous reports, "proving that priority recommendations from other ports have not yet been fully implemented."

Similar concerns were outlined by Justa Encarnacion, commissioner of the V.I. Department of Health. She said the agency's areas for improvement include "transportation for non-ambulatory patients, long-term staffing, patient tracking, and finalizing critical operations agreements."

The exercise also "highlighted the importance of sustaining clinical staffing beyond the first 72 hours hours after a storm." Ms. Encarnacion said DOH will also focus on strengthening the medical supply chain and "fatality management capabilities."

Darlene Baptiste, chief executive officer for both hospitals, provided additional information on hospital preparedness. Although she now leads both hospitals, her testimony focused largely on the Juan F. Luis Hospital on St. Croix, her original appointment. She outlined healthcare infrastructure resilience, the hospitals' hurricane readiness framework, and plans for continuity of operations on St. Croix.

One key issue was the continuity of dialysis services. Ms. Baptiste told Senator Hubert Frederick that there are "alternate locations that are readily available to us on the island of St. Croix," and said she intends to formalize memoranda of understanding.

Ms. Encarnacion added that DOH has "a concise plan of how we would evacuate, as well as how we track the patients electronically" if evacuation becomes necessary.

The committee also heard from the Department of Human Service. Assistant Commissioner Carla Benjamin said DHS has "inspected and vetted numerous locations across the territory to identify appropriate, accessible sites that meet fire, health, and American Red Cross standards to serve as emergency shelters."

DHS is focused on ensuring "reliable food and hydration distribution," Ms. Benjamin said. FEMA has "positioned 222,000 shelf-stable meals and 454,00 liters of water on St. Croix, alongside 30,000 meals and 34,000 liters of water on St. John." Bottled water will be available for the elderly and "medically fragile residents."

The department also stands prepared to provide Disaster SNAP to provide "electronic food benefits to residents facing severe food or income loss."

DHS has identified several shelters, including locations with pet-sheltering capabilities and kitchens that can be used to prepare meals for community distribution.

Although several public buildings are available for use as shelters, Mr. Jaschen explained that only one shelter may be opened per island. “My number one concern on shelters are having certified nurses in the shelters before I open them up,” he said.

The issue of nurse shortages came up repeatedly during the hearing. Ms. Encarnacion said the Department of Health is exploring options to engage prescriptive nurses if the need arises. DOH runs the medical special needs shelters, and its 18 nurses not employed at the Eldra Schulerbrant facility are deployed there.

Lawmakers also discussed the availability of functional generators at disaster shelters. Mr. Jaschen clarified that where facilities do not have generators, or have deficient generators, VITEMA has already mobilized resources.

He also told Senator Kenneth Gittens that the governor has pledged resources to purchase sandbags. During VITEMA’s budget hearing, Mr. Jaschen had warned that there was no funding for sandbags at the time.

Meanwhile, the Water and Power Authority said it is taking steps to strengthen resilience. Don Gregoire, WAPA’s interim chief operating officer of water, said wooden poles have been replaced with 10,213 composite poles “designed to withstand winds of up to 200 miles per hour.”

He also said “approximately 40%” of the electrical distribution system has been placed underground. Mr. Gregoire said WAPA has “expanded its vegetation management efforts and established a dedicated tree trimming crew in each district.”

On the water side, WAPA has used EPA funding to “make targeted investment in water infrastructure improvements” aimed at reducing water loss and improving resilience.

Still, Mr. Gregoire said WAPA continues to face significant constraints. He testified that the authority’s “most significant concern remains our financial position.” Limited cash reserves continue to affect WAPA’s ability to “build emergency inventories to desired levels, purchase additional fuel reserves, accelerate fleet repairs, and maintain sufficient financial flexibility...”

All of the testifiers, including the V.I. Police Department, the Department of Public Works, the V.I. Fire and Emergency Medical Services and the National Guard, emphasized the importance of interagency collaboration. Officials said regular engagement continues.

Even so, Mr. Jaschen told Senator Novelle Francis that he would grade the territory’s readiness at a B-. “Even though we’re in hurricane season, we have more work to do,” he stated.