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New Sept. 1 SNAP Rules Could Affect 5,000 Recipients as USVI Cost Share Rises to 75%

Starting Sept. 1, about 5,000 SNAP recipients could lose benefits if they do not meet work, school or volunteer requirements, while the territory's administrative cost share rises to 75 percent and DHS seeks a $200.98 million operating budget for FY2027.

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New federal SNAP requirements taking effect September 1 could affect approximately 5,000 Virgin Islands recipients who do not meet weekly work, education or volunteer requirements, while the territory's share of SNAP administrative costs is set to rise from 50 percent to 75 percent in fiscal year 2027.

Department of Human Services Commissioner Averil George outlined the changes as the agency requested a combined local and federal operating budget of $200,976,727 for the coming fiscal year.

The proposal includes a General Fund request of $72,587,075, an 11.43 percent increase over fiscal year 2026, supported by another $545,000 from the Miscellaneous General Fund.

DHS expects $128,389,652 in federal funding, which George described as a “normalized realignment” following the full drawdown and use of disaster and pandemic assistance. Funding availability is now tied to “statutory federal ceilings.”

SNAP Changes Increase Local Costs

George said DHS is “actively managing operational challenges required by new federal rules under H.R. 1, The One Big Beautiful Bill Act.”

Among the changes are restrictions on retroactive Medicaid coverage and a reduction in the federal contribution toward administering the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

Beginning October 1, the federal share of SNAP administrative costs will fall from 50 percent to 25 percent. The territory will consequently be responsible for 75 percent instead of half of those expenses.

The change “doubles the territory’s required local matching burden from 50 percent to 75 percent to maintain core SNAP operations, outreach, and system planning,” George said.

The legislation also imposes new requirements on SNAP beneficiaries classified as able-bodied adults without dependents. Those recipients will be required to demonstrate that they are working, attending school or participating in a volunteer program.

They must engage in one or a combination of those activities for at least 20 hours each week.

“If you don’t have any one of them three components, you can’t receive SNAP anymore,” George explained.

The requirements take effect September 1, and approximately 5,000 beneficiaries could be affected if they do not comply.

DHS has mailed notices to recipients and distributed information through social media to explain the changes.

“Folks just need to come in,” said Assistant Commissioner Taetia Phillips-Dorset. “If you’re not working, you can volunteer and get some of the hours that way.”

Sen. Kurt Vialet recommended placing notices at supermarkets to reach more beneficiaries directly.

Five Head Start Classrooms Face Risk

Lawmakers also expressed concern that staffing shortages and an approximately $2,046,835 reduction in grant funding could affect the opening of five Head Start classrooms for the upcoming program year.

DHS clarified that the shortage of qualified teachers, rather than the funding reduction, is the primary threat to the classrooms.

The program has 637 preschool children enrolled for the coming year.

Assistant Commissioner Carla Benjamin assured Sen. Marvin Blyden that “recruitment is ongoing.”

The department is considering internal advancement as part of its response, including temporarily placing assistant teachers in acting roles before formally promoting them into teacher positions.

Benjamin said the available pool of early-childhood educators is “limited.”

Sen. Novelle Francis Jr. suggested recruiting retired educators to work part time and help address the staffing gap.

Several Head Start facilities are also under construction and approaching completion. DHS said most are replacement buildings rather than entirely new sites that would expand the number of facilities.

Rent Paid on Unoccupied Tutu Park Space

Sen. Carla Joseph questioned why DHS has been paying rent for office space at Tutu Park Mall that remains unoccupied.

The property is intended to house public-facing employees who must be relocated from the Knud Hansen Complex before that facility is demolished in early 2027.

The mall space requires a build-out before it can be occupied, and the procurement process for that work is underway.

George said the federal government agreed to cover 95 percent of the rental cost for the temporary office. Special Projects Manager Akilah O’Brien confirmed that the lease was executed in July 2025.

Joseph described it as a “problem” that public money was being spent on space that had not yet been occupied, referring to “good, hard-working taxpayers’ money.”

George said securing the temporary location was necessary to move the Knud Hansen demolition project forward and was required by the federal government.

She said DHS has made “little or minimal payments” toward its 5 percent General Fund match.

O’Brien acknowledged that it has “been a while” since the lease was signed but said DHS is “working as a team to get through the internal red tape with other agencies.”

GVI Buy Creates Additional Delays

O’Brien said DHS “hit another roadblock when it came to GVI Buy,” the government’s new procurement platform.

Vialet described problems with the system as a “common trend” across government agencies and warned that the delays could jeopardize federal money.

“Maybe GVI Buy, in the long run, is going to work out, but right now, every single department, we’re jeopardizing funds, and if we don’t get these funds spent by a certain due date, it’s going to become an obligation of the general fund,” he stated.

DHS Chief Financial Officer Lydia Magras told lawmakers that GVI Buy has also disrupted payments connected to the Block Grant for child-care services.

Vialet lamented that the difficulties emerged when “you finally had that program where it needed to be.”

Vendor Obligations Exceed $9.17 Million

DHS reported $9,175,855.21 in outstanding vendor payments, although it was not clear whether all of those obligations were delayed by GVI Buy.

Magras said approximately $3 million had been processed through the Gainwell Medical Assistance Program cycle on Monday, meaning the outstanding total would need to be updated.

The department is still handling invoices dating to August 2025.

Magras told Vialet that some payments are “sitting at [the Department of] Finance” while awaiting a check run.

Sen. Avery Lewis urged DHS to move more quickly to spend its federal grants. He said he was “scared about this administration” and criticized the apparent lack of firm timelines for using the available funds.

Magras said several grants were not received until February.

“Then to compound the problem, now we're working through the nuances of GVI Buy, so that has posed another delay,” she said.

DHS is seeking extensions for the federal awards where extensions are available.