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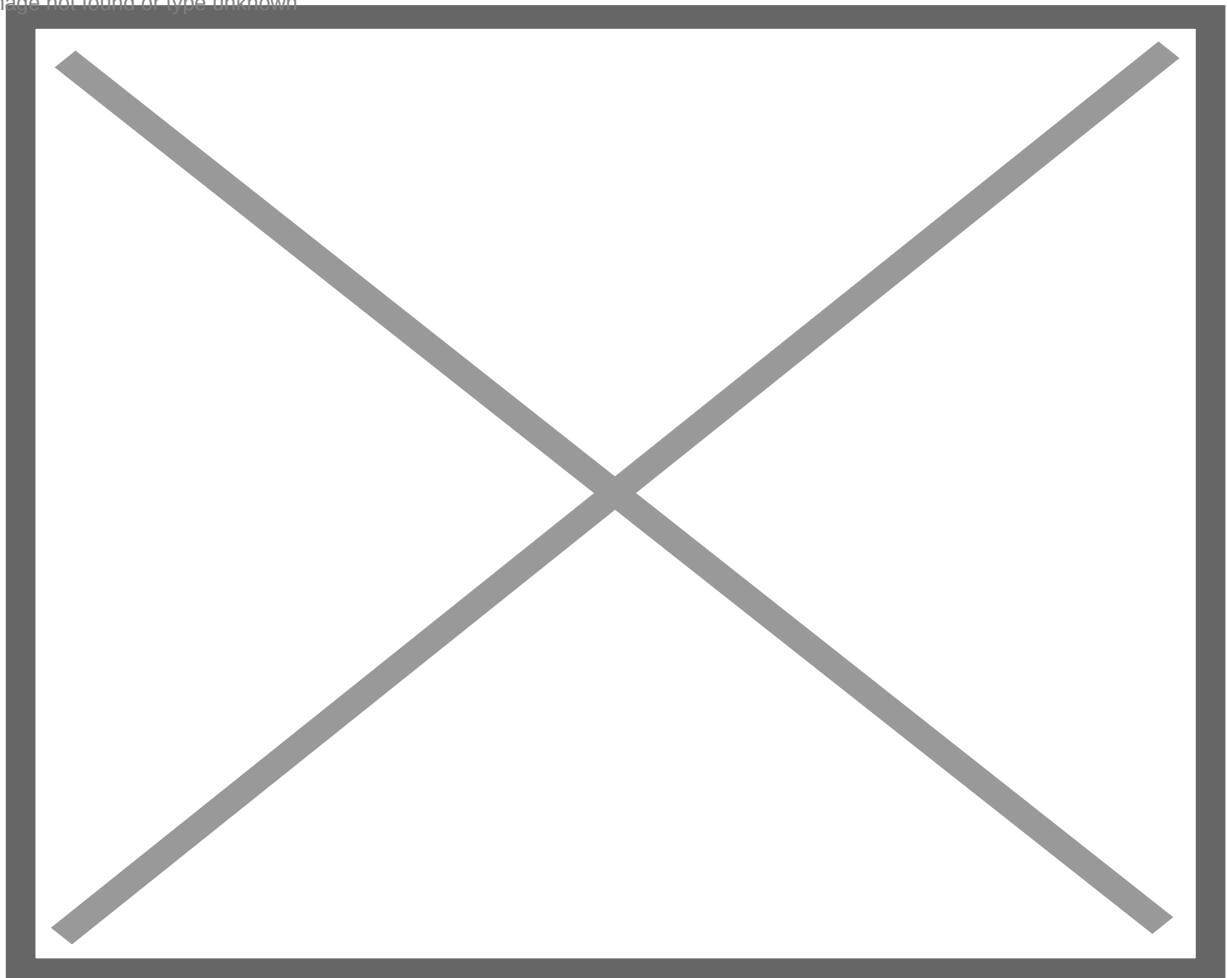
Ground Broken on New Sister Emma Cottage for Children With Severe Disabilities at Queen Louise Home

Construction has begun on a new Sister Emma Cottage at Queen Louise Home, replacing a facility damaged by Irma and Maria. The HUD-funded project will add accessible bathrooms, sensory rooms, a nurse's station and improved space for specialized care there.

Disaster Recovery / **Published On August 14, 2026 06:43 AM /**

Staff Consortium **August 14, 2026**

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Officials and community partners break ground Thursday on the new Sister Emma Cottage at Queen Louise Home on St. Croix, beginning construction of a modern facility for children and young adults with severe disabilities. By. GOV'T HOUSE.

ST. CROIX — Construction has begun on a new Sister Emma Cottage at the Queen Louise Home for Children in Estate Concordia, replacing and improving a facility damaged by Hurricanes Irma and Maria and designed to provide specialized residential care for children and young adults with severe physical and developmental disabilities.

Gov. Albert Bryan Jr., Lt. Gov. Tregenza A. Roach, Lutheran Social Services of the Virgin Islands, government partners and community leaders gathered Thursday for the groundbreaking. The project is funded through a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development grant and is being advanced through a partnership involving LSSVI, the Office of Disaster Recovery, the V.I. Housing Finance Authority and Custom Builders.

The new building is being constructed by Custom Builders VI on the Queen Louise Home campus and is intended to provide greater accessibility, comfort and specialized care than the existing facility.

“Today, we are not simply breaking ground on a building; we are investing in the dignity, safety, and future of children who deserve every opportunity to grow and thrive,” Governor Bryan said. “Sister Emma Cottage represents what happens when government, our nonprofit partners, and the community come together with a shared commitment to caring for our most vulnerable. We are proud to help ensure that the Queen Louise Home continues its legacy of providing children with the love, care and support they deserve.”

Facility Will Serve Children and Young Adults With Severe Disabilities

Sister Emma Cottage provides intensive 24-hour residential foster care to Virgin Islands children and young adults with severe developmental and physical disabilities. Many residents are medically fragile, use wheelchairs and have specialized impairments.

The new cottage will include spacious, fully accessible bathrooms, sensory stimulation rooms, a dedicated nurse’s station and green, energy-efficient capabilities. Lutheran Social Services said those features will allow a higher level of specialized care than the previous facility could provide.

The existing cottage sustained significant flooding and water damage during Hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017 and has continued experiencing water intrusion during periods of heavy rainfall.

Bryan described the facility as part of the territory’s broader infrastructure needs.

“We talk a lot about rebuilding roads, schools and other major pieces of infrastructure, but this is infrastructure too,” Governor Bryan said. “These are the places where our people are cared for and where organizations like Lutheran Social Services do important work every single day. Government cannot do everything alone, and our Administration has made it a priority to support the community partners doing this work. This investment in Sister Emma Cottage is an investment in these children, their caregivers and the families who depend on these services.”

Donors Funded Early Work Before HUD Grant

Lutheran Social Services said its donors provided the initial funding that allowed preliminary work on the project to begin. VIHFA subsequently provided the grant funding necessary to advance the development.

ODR Director Adrienne Williams-Octalien said federal recovery funding is supporting both physical infrastructure and services for vulnerable residents.

“Today's groundbreaking underscores the impact federal recovery dollars can have not only on infrastructure but also on our community and our efforts to serve vulnerable populations across the Territory,” said Adrienne L. Williams-Octalien, Director of the Office of Disaster Recovery. “This project is a prime example of partnership, purpose and patience. The collaboration among all stakeholders, including contractor Custom Builders, Jacobs Consulting, VIHFA, LSS, HUD and ODR, has brought us to this milestone. I applaud everyone involved in getting us to this point, and I look forward to being here to cut the ribbon in 13 months.”

VIHFA Interim Executive Director Valdez Shelford also reflected on the time required to bring the project to construction.

“The three P’s come to mind: purpose, partnership, and patience. It has been a long road to get where we are today, but I have to share my thanks and kudos to the people who care. People who take care of those who can’t take care of themselves are angels on earth,” shared Valdez Shelford, Interim Executive Director of Virgin Islands Housing Finance Authority. “I want to thank everyone who has prioritized this from the Board to the church, and beyond. Don’t ever stop doing the Lord’s work. It means something to us to be charged with executing these funds to build resiliency and quality here in these Virgin Islands.”

Sister Emma Cottage Dates to 1996

The original Sister Emma Cottage opened in 1996 and was named in honor of Lutheran Deaconess Sister Emma Francis.

Francis, a native of St. Kitts, was the first Black deaconess to serve in North America and the first Lutheran deaconess from the West Indies. She spent nearly four decades serving children at the Queen Louise Home before her death in 1945.

Roach said the replacement facility carries that history forward.

“Sister Emma Francis devoted nearly four decades of her life to caring for children on St. Croix, and the cottage that bears her name carries forward that remarkable legacy of compassion and service,” Lieutenant Governor Roach said. “This groundbreaking is a promise to the children we serve today and to generations of children who will come after them. We are building a facility that honors Sister Emma’s example while giving our caregivers the resources and environment they need to provide the highest level of care.”

The program’s more recent history also includes longtime Service Coordinator Phillipa Hypolite, who cared for children and young adults at Sister Emma Cottage for almost 20 years before retiring at the end of February 2026.

LSS Says Project Will Improve Specialized Care

Lutheran Social Services CEO Junia John-Straker said the new facility reflects the organization’s responsibility to those in its care.

“The new Sister Emma Cottage will be another visible representation of the value that Lutheran Social Services of the Virgin Islands places every day on loving, caring for, protecting, and promoting the well-being of everybody entrusted in our care. We are profoundly grateful to everyone in the community who has supported the project to this stage and look forward to its completion,” shared Junia John-Straker, Chief Executive Officer of Lutheran Social Services of the Virgin Islands.

Government House also linked the project to the administration's September 2025 purchase of the Nana Baby Home facility on St. Thomas, which was intended to secure the future of another longtime nonprofit serving vulnerable children.

"Whether it is rebuilding a facility damaged by the hurricanes or stepping in to help preserve a home like Nana Baby, we are putting resources where they can make a real difference in people's lives," Governor Bryan said.

Among those participating in the groundbreaking were DHS Assistant Commissioner Carla Benjamin; VIHFA project manager Xawntoia Franklin; Custom Builders Director Abhiram Ranganath; Shelford; Williams-Octalien; John-Straker; Bryan; Roach; Sens. Kenneth Gittens and Novelle Francis; LSS Board President Henry Smock; and LSS Board Vice President Marjorie Roberts.

The groundbreaking formally begins construction of the modernized cottage, which is intended to strengthen Queen Louise Home's ability to provide specialized care while continuing the work established by Sister Emma Francis and generations of caregivers who followed her.