

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Frustrated Human Services Vendor Speaks Out On Late Payments: "I Can't Take It Anymore"

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Many firms, small and large, conduct business with the Virgin Islands Government and have longstanding contracts for the services they provide. These contracts are sometimes straightforward business transactions, and others are assistance-based, in many cases, subsidized, by the federal government. However, this particular scenario sees one frustrated business owner who runs a daycare in the town of

Frederiksted speaking out against what she says is the government's constant late payments for the service her business provides.

Carol Donowa, owner of La Petite Daycare, didn't want to speak out, but felt she had to with financial pressures mounting. "I can't take it anymore," she said when she contacted the *VI Consortium* on Thursday.

Donowa is referring to the more than \$5,000 she says the government owes her--money she says that has been due since October. However, Donowa says her efforts to try to get answers have been futile. She needs the money by Friday, Dec. 12 to pay her eight employees, but she says although she tried calling the Department of Human Services (DHS), which is responsible for ensuring the Department of Finance gets the necessary information it needs in order to process La Petite Daycare's checks, she has been unable to get through.

"I really don't know what is going on with the Government," Donowa began. "As far as I know, the money that is supposed to be used to pay us on St. Croix, is money that was being sent from Washington every October -- that money is supposed to be there to pay us [vendors]."

Donowa said it's not the first time the Government has taken so long to pay, and that other vendors are facing the same frustrations.

"That's not the first time, but right about now, I really cannot bear down with it anymore. I really don't have any way of paying my employees tomorrow. I am tired of it. I have taken enough from my own, [and] I cannot continue doing that," she said.

La Petite Daycare currently has approximately 30 children enrolled at the center, Donowa said, and her contract is based on the block grant program ran by the Dept. of Human Services. A block grant is a financial aid package that supplies federal money to state and local governments for use in social welfare programs, such as law enforcement, community development, and health services. Block grants provide financing for general areas of social welfare, rather than for specific programs. But, if the program is federally funded, the money, being readily available, should be paid to vendors in a timely fashion.

VI Consortium tried calling the Dept. of Human Services on St. Croix multiple times on Thursday, but would only get an "all circuits are busy" message. *VI Consortium* also contacted DHS in St. Thomas, yet although we were able to speak with someone, that person rerouted us to who should have been the right person to talk to, however no one answered the call.

"I called Human Services on St. Croix since last week but I could not get anyone. I [also] called the commissioner and assistant commissioner's office, but no one is answering the phone," Donowa, whose daycare has been in operation for 14 years, told *VI Consortium*. In fact, Donowa has been so frustrated with the situation that she also tried contacting Dept. of Finance, and after her failed attempts to reach someone there, she called the Governor's office directly.

Donowa also pointed to Human Services Commissioner Christopher E. Finch, saying he is "part of the de Jongh people" and feels he has failed to do his job. She also explained what she believes has caused the payment problem.

"We used to get our payment on time, but what happened, when de Jongh got into office the second term, that's when he asked the private company that used to issue our payments to transfer the money to the general fund, so that's when the problems started happening," she said.

VI Consortium contacted the Finance Dept. on St. Croix and spoke to Mandisa Jean-Baptiste, a receptionist at the department, who immediately connected us to the St. Thomas branch, where she said all financial transactions are made.

Part of the reason for the delay in payments to vendors like Donowa is because "the ERP system has changed," Jasmine Springnette from Finance in St. Thomas told *VI Consortium*. "We upgraded our system to [ERP](#), and the system had a little issue with the upgrade, and payments were not going out as they should."

However, when Springnette understood that Donowa was a vendor for DHS, she said, "She has to call Human Services; all we do is print and mail those checks. Human Services are responsible for the payments."

"Once [Human Services] do what they're supposed to do and the process goes through, the checks will be printed and mailed," Springnette said.

As for Donowa, she has no idea where the money to pay staff on Friday will come from, and it was the exhausting of all her options that lead her to the media.

VI Consortium will continue to reach out to the various departments responsible for ensuring La Petite Daycare gets its payment of more than \$5,000.

Image Credit: *It's 254*