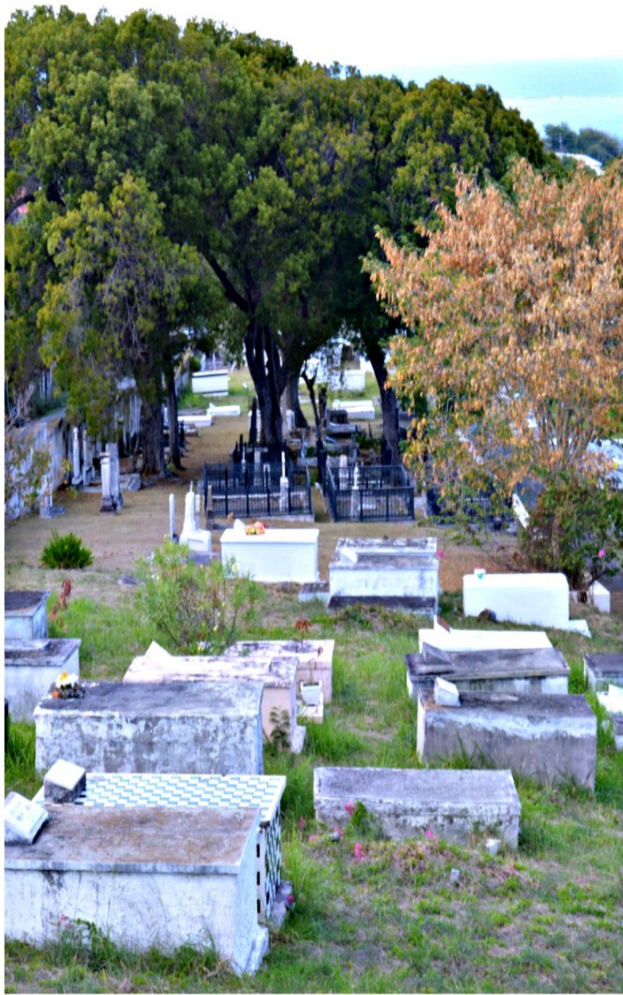


The Virgin Islands Consortium

Government Officials Renew Call For Focus On Mental Health, Homelessness Following Cemetery Slaying

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Cynthia Graham **March 26, 2015**



The Sunday morning slaying of 80-year-old Egbert Thomas, Sr., while visiting the grave site of his deceased wife at the Christiansted public cemetery on St. Croix, by a man who is reportedly "mentally ill and homeless," according to police reports, has shaken the territory, including some of its leaders. Two officials have given voice to the matters of the lack of mental health services and homelessness facing the territory in the days after the killing.

On Wednesday, Congresswoman Stacey Plaskett issued a formal statement about the slaying.

"The entire Virgin Islands community is shocked and saddened by the tragic death of Mr. Egbert Thomas, Sr. Our thoughts and prayers are with his entire immediate and extended family, and the men and women at the Department of Public Works, where Mr. Thomas was a long-time employee," Plaskett wrote.

The freshman congresswoman then highlighted the ongoing problem of the lack of mental health treatment many in the territory's homeless population face, and called for the matter to be addressed.

"Although the circumstances surrounding Mr. Thomas' death are still under investigation, reports indicate that his alleged killer was homeless and mentally ill. This most unfortunate incident underscores the need for us to address the lingering problems with access to mental health treatment for those who need it most in our community," Plaskett said.

On Tuesday at an energy symposium in St. Thomas, Sen. Clifford Graham spoke with *VI Consortium* about a discussion he had with Governor Mapp two weeks prior to the killing concerning the reactivation of the Inter-Agency Council on Homelessness.

"It is an entity, a council that was created under Governor Turnbull and what it does is it brings all of the stakeholders together, not-for-profits like Bethlehem House, Catholic Charities, Ten Thousand Helpers, it also brings the public sector entities in like Health, Human Services, the hospital, the housing entities, and the police and work on a comprehensive strategy to deal with the homeless population here in the territory," he explained.

Graham pointed out, however, that the problem is far deeper than not having a roof over one's head.

"It goes deeper than that because it defines how people became homeless. Some of them have mental problems, so it works on looking at the comprehensive problem and seeing what can be done to eradicate the homeless population that we have here," he said.

Graham went on to say that as part of his previous job as executive director of the Housing Finance Authority, he was a member of the council and attended a series of meetings.

"We looked at the whole housing continuum. To help people that are homeless, we have to help move people from shelters into public housing, but to create the room in public housing, we have to move people from public housing to home ownership, everybody has to move on a stairs," he said.

He said at the time the council was in existence, it also looked at ways of identifying money to help the territory's homeless.

"This was to help deal with the problem that we have, the mental abuse, the housing stock that you have to create," he said. However, at the height of its work, Graham said a new administration came to power with the election of former Governor de Jongh, and the council "ceased to exist and have meetings under the de Jongh administration."

He continued: "I can clearly remember Governor de Jongh sending me an email and telling me that he needed my help to deal with the homeless population in the territory and I responded to him and said, 'but governor there was an Inter-Agency Council on Homelessness that haven't met since you became governor,' and about two to three weeks after that, a letter came that the Inter-Agency Council on Homelessness would have the first meeting under his administration, so I got all excited that we could continue the progress that we made, went to the meeting, and we started from ground zero."

And since that time, Graham said, the council has not "really been meeting" and have relegated its duties to a smaller group called the Continuum of Care.

"Which is unfortunate because there are so many needs here. You have to provide for those mentally ill. We have to do all the services to help irradiate the homeless problem that we have here," the lawmaker said.

Then, speaking specifically of the killing that has sent shock waves across the territory, Graham added, "Even if you go and find this person that committed this crime in St. Croix, even if you go and put them in the hospital, it's only X amount of hospital beds the hospital can absorb. And then, who is paying the bill? So, what happens then, is they release them and they go right back on the streets."

Furthermore, Graham said when he served as executive director of Housing Finance, he had the opportunity to travel and observe what some states on the mainland have done to reduce their homeless populations.

When asked what the 31st Legislature is doing to remedy the lack of mental health services currently offered in the territory, as many mental health patients are sent to off-island treatment and housing facilities at a significant cost to the V.I. government, Graham said the approach should be a collaborative one.

"Again, I would recommend, you can't do it in isolation, meaning the Legislature cannot sit down and say 'Let's provide a piece of legislation or even funding.' It has to be something that is done comprehensively and that's why I'm recommending that [Governor Mapp] reactivate the Inter-Agency Council on Homelessness because the Legislature also was a member of that council as well," he said.

"Whatever legislation that is necessary, whatever funding that is necessary, it's a comprehensive policy that you're working at and everybody working in tandem to deal with the problem," Graham continued.

He further stated that when he spoke to Mapp two weeks ago, he mentioned that Juel Molloy, who is a part of the Mapp administration, was one of the co-chairs of the Inter-Agency on Homelessness, stressing that the governor has someone within his administration who is very familiar with the needs of the territory's homeless population.

See a 2008 report of the state of the territory's mental health care system [here](#).

Details of the cemetery slaying were made available by VIPD Public Information Officer Kevin Jackson on Monday night. Police say Major Lee Womack, 25, a mentally ill transient known to traverse the Christiansted area, had been squatting in one of the structures in the cemetery at about 9 a.m. Sunday.

A concerned citizen called 911 and told dispatchers of an individual striking someone with an object in the cemetery. Officers arriving on the scene discovered Thomas' body and as they approached the suspect, he began hurling rocks and other items at officers. Police were eventually able to subdue, restrain and arrest the assailant, who was later positively identified as Womack.

Jackson said police preliminary investigation revealed that Thomas sustained multiple lacerations to the head, chest and forearm. His wallet, along with his shoes and hat had been stolen by Womack.

On the day of the killing, sources with direct knowledge of the incident told *VI Consortium* that Thomas was attacked with a machete and that after the slaying, his shirt, pants and shoes were stolen.

Womack has been remanded to the Golden Grove Adult Correctional Facility on St. Croix without bail.