

The Virgin Islands Consortium

V.I.P.D., Other Stakeholders Launch 'Operation Saving Private Harvey'

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ST. CROIX -- Residents have long called for police presence in neighborhoods in the territory where crime seems to be prevalent. Concerned Virgin Islanders have contended that if only the V.I.P.D. would show its presence in troubled areas, illicit activity could be undermined.

On Tuesday, the force invited the media to the Harvey Housing Community, where an experiment dubbed Saving Private Harvey had been underway since October 3. The plan entails the clearing of land where stolen and illegal items were being stored, according to police, and taking steps to protect residents, some of whom police say have been terrorized by criminals.

At the event, stakeholders -- including representatives from the V.I.P.D., Office of the Governor, Public Works and at least one member of the housing community, spoke on the importance of the effort and, importantly, how it has already provided positive results.

Since October 3, there has been a 24/7 police presence in the housing community, and according to Lieutenant Robert Matthews, chief of investigations, Harvey has been crime free ever since: no firing of weapons, no assaults and no stolen items.

"You know what this proves? This proves that the initiative works," Lt. Matthews said, referring to the constant presence of police in any given neighborhood.

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Before the stakeholders spoke to reporters, a backhoe was seen clearing out a piece of government-owned land to the west side of the housing community, opening up more space, they said, for youth to play and also as a deterrent for a few who police say have been terrorizing the community by shooting their guns in to the air as a show of power and intimidation. Police said yesterday that the area had been used to harbor illegal activity, including the stashing of weapons and hiding stolen goods.

And they expressed hope in reviving the neighborhood and making it a much safer place to live for law-abiding residents.

"It's a new effort with the police department. Despite the limited resources, we want to come out and reach out to the community," Lt. Matthews said. "We know that they've helped us out on numerous occasions, and we're responding by letting them know that we hear your concerns; that we work for you, and that we are part of the community, and with your help, there's nothing that we can't do."

A well-known resident of the Harvey Housing Community, who owns property in the area, decided to contribute by clearing out a piece of his land to be used for community gardening. "To me, that's very important, [especially] with the price of food going up," he said.

Chief Winsbut McFarland spoke of the multiple initiatives that the force has undertaken, all in an effort to protect residents from violence, and to also work as a deterrent against potential criminals.

"We want to reach out to our community," Chief McFarland said. "We don't want something to happen, you call us and we come." He said the force's duty is to serve the people of the community, "and when we see something, or we see our community hurting, we're supposed to actively get involved with our community, and that's what we're doing right here."

St. Croix Administration Stephanie Williams, representing the Office of the Governor, lauded Chief McFarland for the continuing V.I.P.D. efforts. She also noted her office's actions in expediting the process of getting permits to clear land and to perform other work necessary to quickly undertake projects aimed at bettering the housing community.

Ms. Williams said she immediately moved on the V.I.P.D. requests, contacting the Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority, seeking a reason why the housing community lacked

streetlights. She said it had been determined that Harvey did not owe W.A.P.A. a balance, "so I expect to see these lights on by tomorrow (which is today), so that it could enhance what is taking place in here."

Ms. Williams said employees from the Office of the Governor were brought in to tag abandoned vehicles, "and started removing stuff that creates an unsafe environment for those that live in here."

The V.I.P.D. is expected to expand the effort into other neighborhoods.

Feature Image: From left to right: Stephanie Williams, Winsbut McFarland, Mr. Rodriguez (community member), and Robert Mathews. (Credit: Ernice Gilbert, VIC)

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