

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Queen Louise, Where Seniors Reside, Has Been Condemned As Uninhabitable Since Hurricane Marilyn, Says Former Coordinator

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Ernice Gilbert **June 03, 2017**



Queen Louise Home for the Aged has been condemned since Hurricane Marilyn, which landed in the territory in September of 1995. That's what Vera Falu, former territorial coordinator for homes for the aged in the territory told the Senate Committee on Health, Hospitals and Human Services on Friday.

Ms. Falu was attempting to bolster the Department of Human Services' reason for its desire to purchase the Sea View Nursing Home in St. Thomas, which would see D.H.S. moving the residents of Queen Louise Home for the Aged to Sea View.

When the hurricane struck, Queen Louise residents were moved temporarily to the Schneider Regional Medical Center, but they were later brought back to the then-damaged facility, which Ms. Falu described as a miscommunication.

"Some communication was misplaced at that time, and the seniors were moved back to Queen Louise, which is a condemned building," she said. Ms. Falu spoke passionately about the seniors, making the case that they should be highly regarded. "The majority of the seniors want to stay at home... but those that come into the institutions deserve the utmost respect, and dignity and funding to be able to function properly," she said.

Ms. Valu said if D.H.S. had been successful in purchasing Sea View, Queen Louise residents would have been moved to the location, and Queen Louise would then be "razed to the ground." But senators this week removed legislation that would have authorized the government to buy the facility, with lawmakers voicing a concern that has become all too familiar with residents, which is the issue of funding.

"We don't know what the future is going to hold in terms of finance," said Senator Sammuel Sanes. "We keep getting these different versions of what's going on," he added, referring to communication from Government House. He said multiple senators have floated the idea of going to Government House to find out for themselves what is the exact state of the territory's treasury.

D.H.S. Chief Financial Officer Jennifer O'Neal, after being asked by committee chair Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly whether Queen Louise could be repaired, said about \$800,000 to \$1 million would not only save the facility, but also reopen the upper floor, adding 40 to 50 more beds. "My opinion is the facility is salvageable," she said.

But the issue of funding persisted, and not only to repair the facility or perhaps purchase Sea View, but to fund a myriad of other programs within the sprawling department.

Senator Kurt Vialet railed against what he considered to be redundant positions all through government, and suggested that D.H.S. cut some of those positions and pay regular employees more.

"Deputy commissioners, assistant commissioners, assistant to the assistant commissioners -- you just have layers of management. A lot of layers of management throughout government got to go," he said. The second-term Democrat said some of the positions are political, "and it's stopping us from being able to give the little employees who are making \$20,000 a raise."

Many other issues were discussed at the hearing, among them D.H.S.'s failure to use half a million dollars for additional employees at Herbert Grigg. "Act 7838. \$5000,000. Was that utilized?" Asked Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly, referring to legislation that had been passed for additional staffing at the facility. The funds were not utilized, according Director of Residential Services at Herbert Grigg, Ana Velez-Martinez. Ms. Velez-Martinez said Vivian Fludd was D.H.S. commissioner at the time, and that all the pertinent information was passed on to the former commissioner.

"As a director, I did what I needed to do," she said, adding that emails were sent to Mrs. Fludd pointing out that the funds needed to be used by a certain date or else the department would lose the money. "I think we had to use it by September [2016]," she

said.

Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly, however, informed the D.H.S. officials -- among them D.H.S. Commissioner Felicia Blyden and former senator Diane Capehart -- that the legislature had extended the funds' availability to D.H.S.

"We gave you \$500,000 and the money is just there... and nobody seems to know we have extended it to be available until expended," Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly said.

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