

The Virgin Islands Consortium

St. Croix Residents Express Satisfaction In Mapp Administration's Handling Of Disaster

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ST. CROIX -- Optimism, patience, progress and community were some of the buzzwords floating around the point of distribution centers on St. Croix last Tuesday. Fifteen days after the USVI felt the first effects of Category 5 Hurricane Maria, The Consortium visited three of St. Croix's 5 distribution centers to get some feedback from the community about the government's response to the aftermath of the storm, and their personal experiences so far on the path to recovery.

Three weeks in, and the lines at the distribution centers are much shorter than they were immediately following the hurricane. Many factors may play a role in that, as the curfew hours continue to ease, giving people more time to maneuver, and stores have

reopened. The territory has also seen an exodus of residents who needed to leave for various reasons.

With that being said, residents also praised the improvements at the distribution centers which has contributed to a much faster process of receiving goods. While most people interviewed for this story complained about the chaotic and unorganized setup during the early days of the distribution of goods and supplies, most acknowledged a shift and change as the days continued, and were very complimentary of the assistance provided by National Guardsmen from abroad. This reporter also witnessed the hard work of the local guardsmen providing exemplary service to those that they were serving.

Residents interviewed were mostly satisfied with the progress of the recovery thus far. A young man from the Williams Delight community, which was one of the hardest hit areas on the island, stated, "Things are moving slow, but we are making progress." He spoke of neighbors assisting neighbors in the clearing of roads and yards in his community, which seems to be a common theme in the days following the hurricane. Residents also seemed to agree with the curfew imposed by the administration. One resident felt the curfew should be adjusted so as to give more daylight time for residents to conduct business, telling a story of almost getting into a catastrophic accident during the evening hours as another car swerved into her lane to avoid some wires hanging from a pole.

Aside from those concerns, most residents said the administration was making progress with the resources available, with the presence of road crews throughout the island playing a role in that perception.

Yet, while most residents interviewed for this story felt that progress being made by the administration has been adequate, there were a minority of dissenters, with some incorrectly contending that most roads were cleared by residents and not necessarily government contractors. Others said that the chaotic days following Hurricane Maria and the seeming lack of a plan or any structure set in place for the immediate aftermath of the storm, contributed to some of the looting that occurred. They also pointed to the slow pace of FEMA's Blue Roof program, which Governor Mapp himself has reportedly pointed out to President Donald Trump in a recent face-to-face meeting.

A lot of residents were anxious to see what changes Hurricane Maria will bring. An educator expressed her opinion that, "Things will stay the same, because the people are the same."

What we do know is that thousands of Virgin Islanders left on mercy cruises and flights. It remains to be seen the impact their departure will have on the Virgin Islands economy moving forward, as the territory already suffers from a brain drain epidemic. When living conditions improve, will the Virgin Islands be able to attract back its young talent? Will things remain the same or will Hurricane Maria bring about some change that people desperately want in the way things are done? These questions won't immediately provide answers, but as the weeks, months and years pass -- pending the Caribbean and the USVI remain free from major storms -- the answers will reveal themselves with consequences accompanying the reality.

Feature Image: A line is formed outside the Juanita Gardine Elementary School MRE distribution center. (Ernice Gilbert, VIC)

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