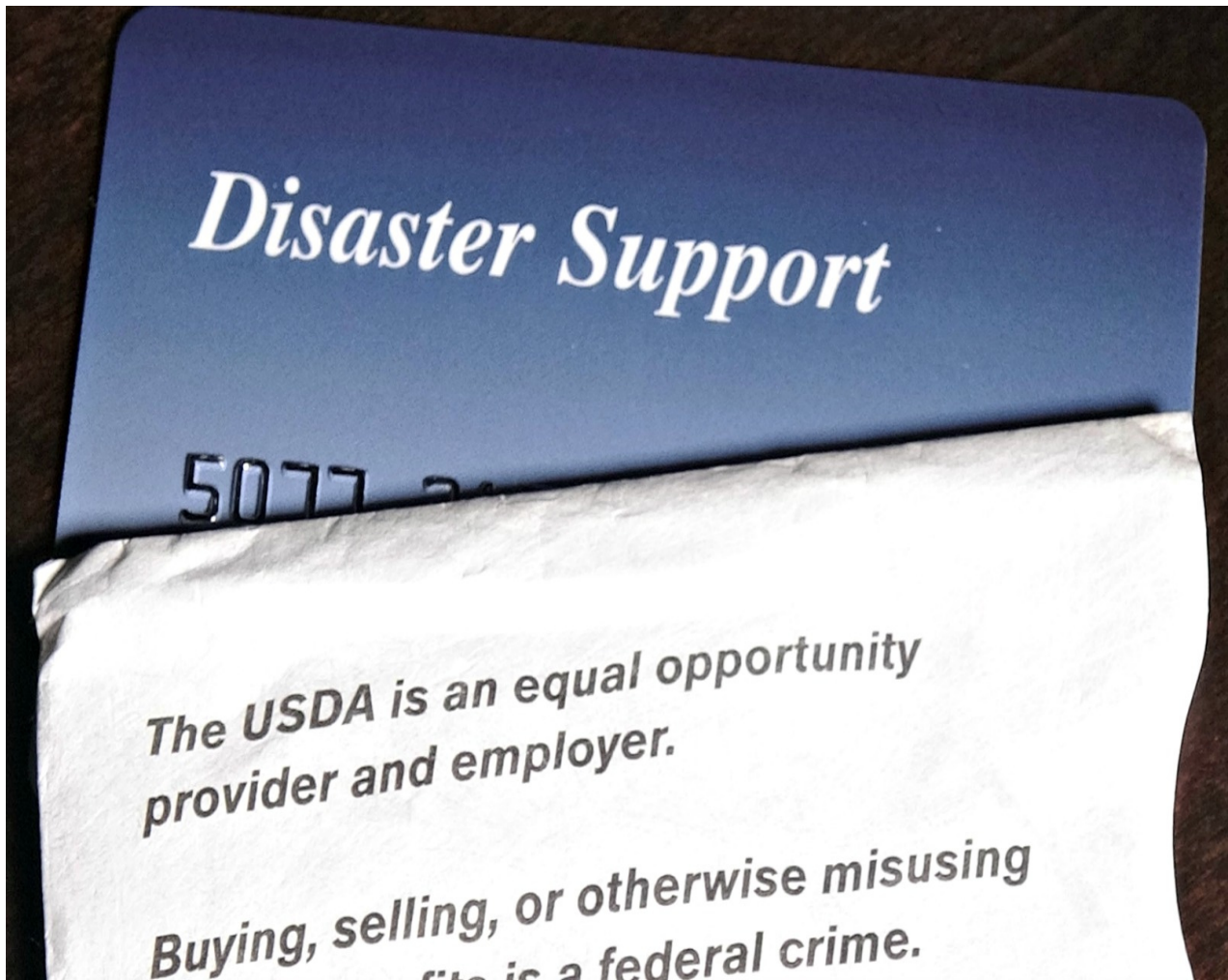


The Virgin Islands Consortium

Some DSNAP EBT Cards Are Not Reflecting Approved Disaster Funds

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ST. CROIX -- Roughly two months following Hurricanes Irma and Maria, and a full week since the Dept. of Human Services began making available Disaster Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (DSNAP) EBT cards with approved funds for hurricane survivors, some residents are reporting that their cards have not worked at all, even after the 72-hour waiting period.

These residents, who requested anonymity to speak freely, said they received approval last Monday, but as of today -- and after calling a toll free help number dozens of times --

the EBT cards still did not reflect a single dollar of the approved funds.

The Consortium tried one of residents' card to better understand the problem. After inserting the card number during the first call to the help line, the automated voice said, "Sorry, I'm having trouble locating that card number. Please enter your 16-digit card number." Looking carefully at the number, it was entered again, only to receive this automated response: "That doesn't appear to be a valid number. Please reenter your 16-digit card number." The number was entered a third time and the results were the same: "Sorry, I'm still not able to recognize the card number."

The card used was approved by D.H.S. at the Christiansted Seniors Center location, two blocks down from the Juanita Gardine School. The problem appears to be well known, too, and supermarket cashiers have been directing residents with nonfunctional cards back to the location where they were approved, for assistance.

But the issue has frustrated affected residents, many of whom were depending on the funds to replenish their depleted cabinets, and for those with power, their refrigerators. "The issue has forced me to use the limited funds that I had, which has inconvenienced me, as I was hoping that the EBT card would help with food, while I use my limited funds for gas and other non-food items," said one of affected residents, who waited in the line for an entire day. "It's frustrating that something that I thought should have helped me to use as a buffer, still to this day has not been beneficial."

DNSAP application is expected to end on Wednesday, if a D.H.S. application for extension is not approved by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). If the extension is approved, the program may run for another week or two, giving more time to residents to apply for the aid.

Though the EBT card problem appears to be well known, D.H.S. hasn't spoken about the issue, not even during Governor Mapp's press briefings, where most of the pertinent information relative to the administration's hurricane recovery efforts is divulged. It was during one of those briefings that the DSNAP rollout -- along with details -- was announced.

The EBT card matter compounds what has been a disastrous rollout of DSNAP for the Mapp administration. In October, the governor said residents would start receiving their EBT cards on Oct. 16. However, just days before the rollout date, Mr. Mapp said a decision was made to delay the rollout to early November because the territory had no power, and residents would use the cards to purchase food items that needed refrigeration. That comment was received as an insult by many Virgin Islanders, who contended that they were intelligent enough to discern what items would spoil if not refrigerated, and those that would not.

Then, as early November approached, Mr. Mapp changed the reason as to why the DSNAP rollout was delayed, stating that the program needed authorization from the Food and Nutrition Service, a division of the U.S.D.A. During that time, the governor invited Felicia Blyden, commissioner of D.H.S., to one of his press briefings to explain. She said because the program is federally funded, there are certain criteria that must be met before authorization is given. She then revealed that D.H.S. had experienced "some challenges" that created "additional issues." She said DSNAP requires electronic

payments, meaning the EBT cards would be used. However, the local D.H.S. had experienced some setbacks because of connectivity. Furthermore, she said, D.H.S. needed to train staff in preparation for the DSNAP issuance, and that a call center was being setup where residents could request information.

D.H.S. said the issues were addressed, and the department ostensibly trained its employees in preparation for the rollout. Even so, the rollout, at least to those affected by the nonfunctional EBT cards, appears to have been botched.

Residents already on the regular SNAP, whose cards were to be credited with the DSNAP funds, have not experienced the problem, leading observers to believe that the problem is with activation of the temporary EBT cards following registration at the application locations. Cashiers have suggested that the problem may be that the D.H.S. representatives may have bungled the process of submitting the card information of affected residents into the system. Or it could be that the inundation of applicants have overwhelmed D.H.S. and information is not being submitted to the system efficiently.