

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Destroyed By Hurricanes Irma And Maria, Calls For School Shanties To Be Rebuilt

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School shanties housing students while they wait for their pickup to school were destroyed by Hurricanes Irma and Maria, but five months after the storms -- and months following the reopening of school -- the shanties remain destroyed, many without adequate roofing and seating, leaving students exposed to the elements. Above, students wait on a school bus at the Williams Delight shanty. The picture was sent to The Consortium by a concerned resident frustrated with the length of time it's taken to fix the shanty.

Senator Kurt Vialet on Friday called on Governor Kenneth Mapp and the Department of Public Works to immediately rebuild the structures for the safety of students.

"This is unsafe and I'm calling on the governor and Acting Commissioner [Nelson] Petty to begin reconstruction/repair of school bus shanties across the territory immediately," Mr. Violet said. He said the exposure could also place students at risk of being injured.

The shanties being destroyed is one of a myriad of issues faced by the administration following the storms. Over 9 schools have been condemned, split sessions continue across the territory, limiting students to four hours of lessons, and the modular units that are to be erected to better facilitate learning, won't be ready until next school year, according to the Dept. of Education (D.O.E.).

And D.O.E continues to struggle with the exodus of educators who leave for better opportunities on the U.S. mainland, exacerbating an education crisis in the territory.

D.O.E. Commissioner Sharon McCollum, testifying before the Committee on Education, Youth and Recreation in January, gave lawmakers an example of what she's dealt with relative to teachers resigning. She said one teacher who recently parted ways with D.O.E., wrote, "After much thought and trial in trying to make ends meet here, I must inform you of my intent to depart from the D.O.E. .. This is by no means a hasty decision, however, due to the fact I have \$500 coming out of each paycheck, I can no longer keep up with my bills."

Teachers and other government employees see deductions from their biweekly checks from Social Security, Medicaid, Federal income tax, GERS and health insurance. For some, the reduction of funds is unsustainable in an territory whose cost of living is already high.

In August 2017, Ms. McCollum said D.O.E. had lost 80 teachers. Back then, [she blamed](#) the resignations on competition from mainland teaching institutions: "Applicants' interest quickly dissipates when they attempt to negotiate incentives and salary schedules. Our department is simply at a disadvantage and unable to compete with school districts nationally in regards to monetary compensation," Ms. McCollum acknowledged.