

The Virgin Islands Consortium

After Outcry, Mapp Says O.M.B. Will Release Funds To Nonprofits

Videos / **Published On March 21, 2018 07:45 AM /**

Ernice Gilbert **March 21, 2018**



ST. CROIX -- In a release issued late Tuesday, Governor Kenneth Mapp said he has directed the Office of Management and Budget to release funds to local nonprofit organizations as authorized by law.

According to Government House, during a Tuesday meeting, Mr. Mapp was briefed by O.M.B. Acting Director Julio Rhymer on the list of organizations awaiting funding. The governor was said to have advised Mr. Rhymer that continuing to release allotments to the nonprofit organizations – particularly those that provide social, health and safety services -- must be a priority over the next several weeks.

"While we must acknowledge that revenues to the government were far reduced in the immediate aftermath of the storms, funding for those organizations that provide life sustaining services to our community must be addressed," Mr. Mapp said.

Word of Mr. Mapp's directive to O.M.B. came minutes after the conclusion of a 4-hour meeting at the G.E.R.S. building on St. Croix and via teleconference in the WICO conference room in St. Thomas, organized by the Senate Committee on Health, Hospitals and Human Services, chaired by Senator Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly. There, nonprofit organizations expressed frustration that the government would choose to cut funding for entities so critical to the territory. Among them were the Women's Coalition, My Brother's Workshop, Lutheran Services of the Virgin Islands, The Village, Virgin Islands Partners for Recovery, Ten Thousand Helpers, the Virgin Islands Volunteer Advocate for Children, Little Kidz Klub Pre-School, Men's Coalition, the Clifton Hill Group Home, Catholic Charities and others.

The nonprofits also used the opportunity bring to the fore other problems they've faced in trying to receive payment. They decried the lateness in which funds were said to be customarily delivered -- sometimes 6 months behind. And some told stories of how they kept their doors open after the storm and the help they provided to the community. To some, the government simply did not understand the importance of the services these organizations provide.

"I think the biggest problem here is that the government doesn't realize how important nonprofits are," said Clema Lewis, Women's Coalition of St. Croix executive director.

Ms. Lewis requested that senators pass legislation that would see the funding for nonprofits being moved from the miscellaneous section of the budget to a section of more importance -- making funding more of a priority. Senators O'Reilly, Kurt Vialet, Sammuell Sanes, Marvin Blyden and Novelle Francis -- all who attended the meeting on St. Croix -- agreed with Ms. Lewis and said they would craft the legislation. Even so, Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly said during the meeting that she was told by Department of Finance Commissioner Valdamier Collens, that there was no guarantee the nonprofits would be funded even if their funding were placed as a line item under a department or agency, "because it is all dependent on the availability of funds," she said, quoting Mr. Collens.

"We're out here doing work, working with people that nobody wants to work with," said Kendall Tutein, president of the Village Virgin Islands, Partners for Recovery. "And we're the ones that are carrying the weight, we're looking for the money, we're trying to diversify, we're fundraising -- we're doing all these things. We're applying for federal grants and when we have this inconsistent local system that we can't depend on as a base to get additional money, that's a problem."

Department of Human Services Commissioner Felicia Blyden said she would work to assure that D.H.S. does all in its power to release the funds. During the meeting, Ms. Blyden, who joined via conference, had read aloud a list of seven nonprofits that had received funding as part of a priority list. Asked who created the list, Ms. Blyden said it came from O.M.B., but would not say who had created it. The revelation invited the angst of the nonprofit officials in the room, confused as to how those on the list were selected. Meanwhile, some of the nonprofits on the list in attendance on Tuesday said they had not received the stated funding.

Following the meeting, Mr. Vialet, who had reached out to the governor during the meeting to inform him of the dire financial problems facing the organizations, received a call from Mr. Rhymer, who is said to have stated after receiving a directive from the governor, that the funds would be released in two weeks.

According to Government House, Mr. Mapp directed O.M.B. to work with the Department of Finance to release funds to those entities as soon as is possible. The governor was said to have noted that although the V.I. Hurricane Recovery and Resiliency Task Force through the Community Foundation of the U.S. Virgin Islands, had provided more than \$3 million in grants to organizations since the hurricanes, those funds were not intended to replace monies appropriated by the Legislature.

"Supporting the nonprofit community and the vital services they provide to our residents remains a top priority of the Mapp-Potter Administration," Mr. Mapp said.

Going by the information Government House provided late Tuesday, it appears that the governor was not aware of a very impactful decision that was set to affect -- even to the point of closure for some -- the territory's nonprofits; an anomaly for a governor believed to employ a hands-on approach.