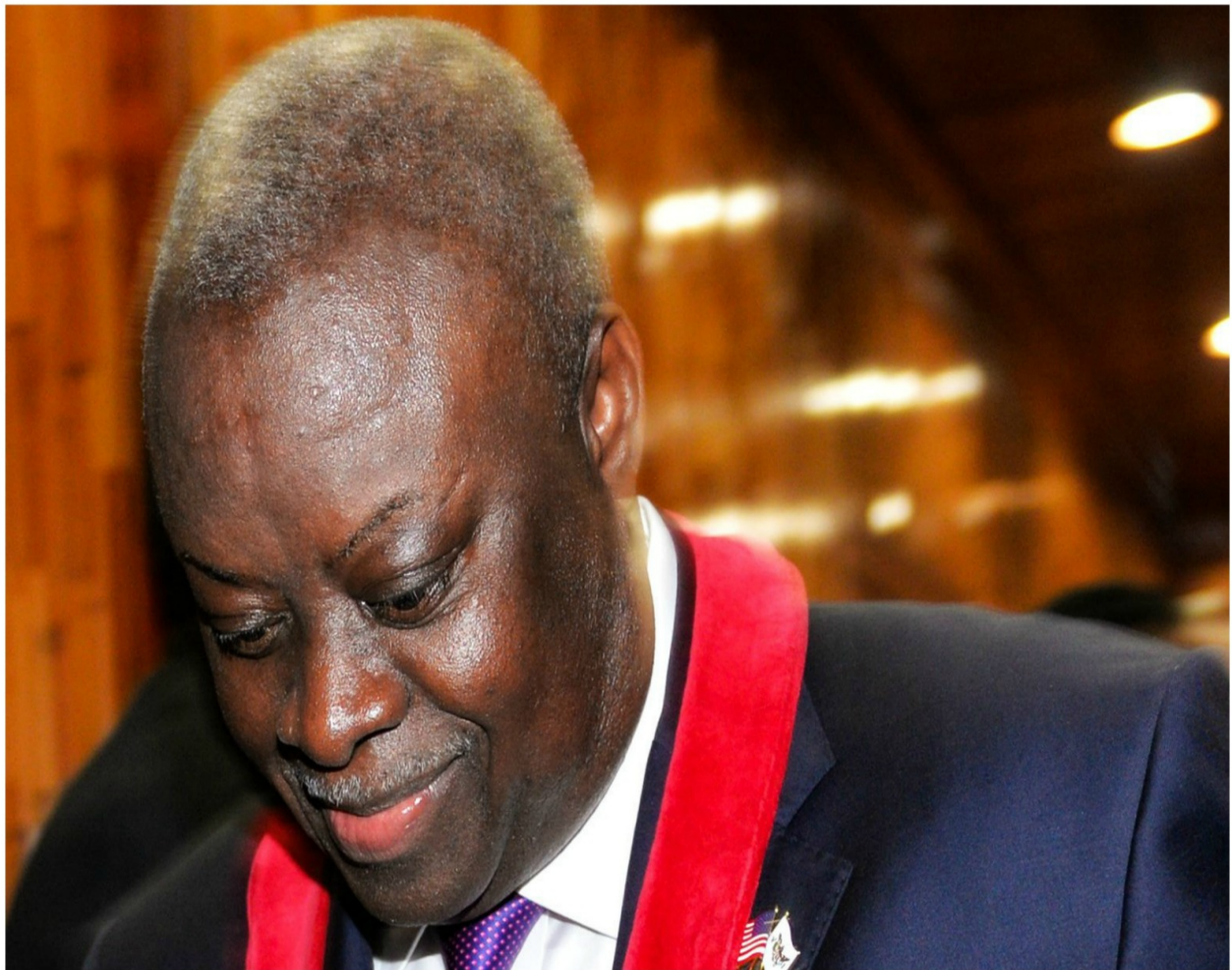


The Virgin Islands Consortium

Suit Filed Against Governor Mapp, OMB And DHS To Block Closure Of VI Behavioral Services

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ST. CROIX -- The abrupt announcement of the closure of the Virgin Islands Behavioral Services, whose programs for years have served as the lifeline for at-risk youth in the territory, has prompted a lawsuit from the Virgin Islands Volunteer Advocates for Children, Inc., (V.I.V.A.) -- a nonprofit organization on St. Croix that represents the voice of abused and neglected children through its child advocacy program widely known to the community as CASA -- and the Office of the Territorial Public Defender.

Defendants named in the case are Governor Kenneth Mapp, Department of Human Services Commissioner Felicia Blyden, and Office of Management and Budget Director Julio Rhymer, the former WAPA executive director.

The suit, set for a Monday hearing in the Superior Court at 1:30 p.m., seeks injunctive and declaratory relief on behalf of the affected children who are residents of V.I.B.S.'s programs, many of whom are victims of child abuse and neglect. The suit also requires V.I.B.S. to provide an extended transition period during which V.I.B.S. would be required to continue treatment while appropriate plans can be put in place to address the ongoing needs of the children. The Government of the Virgin Islands is required to make timely payments for services during this period as well.

D.H.S. public relations person Carol Burke, said, "D.H.S. will reserve comment on this issue in light of the impending TRO [temporary restraining order] filed with the court."

A response from the governor was not furnished at time of writing.

Gail Shearer, executive director of V.I.V.A. told The Consortium on Friday that it is believed the government owes millions of dollars to V.I.B.S., whose parent company, [Universal Health Services](#) (U.H.S.), is a Fortune 500 company. And while the parties involved haven't confirmed the reason for the closure, the government's debt to V.I.B.S. is believed to be the reason.

But V.I.B.S., whose closure was announced in May, only has two more weeks before it completely shuts, a move that would leave many children requiring treatment for emotional and behavioral issues, which have often surfaced as a result of childhood trauma experienced by these children, without adequate care, according to the suit. "The abrupt closing of a therapeutic residential program without a properly implemented transitional plan for each of the residents is contrary to the duty owed to these children by V.I.B.S. and the Virgin Islands Government," reads a portion of the suit.

V.I.B.S. operates multiple behavioral services in the territory housing patients from both districts, including the therapeutic residential treatment programs for children at its Crisis Stabilization Center, Cottage, Girl's Group Home, and Boy's Group Home on St. Croix, and a community-based program for children known as JWRAP on St. Thomas.

"The children were told by staff that the facility is closing but nothing more and this has left many of them filled with anxiety and worry about what is going to happen to them," said Ms. Shearer. "Social workers at the Department of Human Services are encouraging children and their representatives to contact Assistant Commissioner Janet Turnbull Krieger and Commissioner Felicia Blyden because the social workers are not aware of the department's plan for these children, despite there being only two weeks left until the doors of VIBS are to be closed."

According to Ms. Shearer, the abruptness of the closing has created a crisis situation and alternative placements are being determined by administrative convenience rather than in response to the continuing needs and well-being of the children, including the accelerated return of children to the homes that they were removed from.

Meanwhile, staff at the facilities set to close are witnessing firsthand how the transition process has been affecting the children, Ms. Shearer said.

Dara Hamilton of The Lotus Center for Well Being, said, "Child and adolescent 'acting out' is often interpreted simplistically as a 'behavior problem.' However, it has become known that a significant portion of acting out behavior is the result of changes associated

with the experience of trauma.”

According to Ms. Hamilton, the trauma includes exposure to traumatic or stressful events caused by the termination of a relationship formed with an institution acting as a surrogate, such as V.I.B.S., which has been the caretaker for some of these children for many years. She said the changes in routine and an entire way of life at a time when these children's support system and ongoing relationship with their therapists are being terminated, may also serve to amplify the stress.

Without comment from Government House or D.H.S., it is difficult to understand why the government would allow these essential facilities to shutter.

Correction: June 18, 2018

A previous version of this story incorrectly stated that today's court hearing would take place at the District Court on St. Croix. However, the hearing was scheduled for and took place at the Superior Court on St. Croix. We've updated the story to reflect the correct information.