

The Virgin Islands Consortium

If A Hurricane Were To Threaten The USVI, Evacuation Of Residents Would Be Among Considerations, FEMA Administrator, Mona Barnes, Say

VIC News / **Published On June 21, 2018 10:23 AM /**

Ernice Gilbert **June 21, 2018**



ST. CROIX -- During a press conference held at the Federal Emergency Management Agency's offices in Sunny Isle here on Wednesday, F.E.M.A. Administrator William Long said the federal agency has been making preparations to ensure an immediate response for the U.S. Virgin Islands in case of a hurricane. Mr. Long, joined at the press event by F.E.M.A. Coordinating Officer for Region II William Vogel, and Mona Barnes, the Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency (V.I.T.E.M.A.) director, had met with the governor a day before where the teams discussed contingency plans for the 2018 Hurricane Season -- among them what would happen if another major storm were to

affect the U.S.V.I.

What would happen if a hurricane were to threaten the U.S.V.I. in the coming days? The Consortium posed the question to Mr. Long in light of the over 10,600 residents who have sought help from F.E.M.A.'s Emergency VI Home Repair Program and most of whom have yet to see their homes repaired. The slow progress on the program can be attributed to a snag in the VI government's ability to access the funds; F.E.M.A. requires the local government to pay upfront for the projects' costs, while F.E.M.A. reimburses the full cost thereafter. The U.S. Treasury has allocated \$186 million so far for the work with more to come, but only \$13.6 million had been received by the local government as of Tuesday to pay contractors, according to Mr. Vogel.

Further more, according to Ms. Barnes, V.I.T.E.M.A. had inspected 20 facilities in the territory, and "maybe two or three" were ready to serve as shelters. "We know that's not going to work," Ms. Barnes said. "One of the things we're going to have to start thinking about is evacuation prior to [a storm]. When we usually plan for a storm, it's 72 hours before a storm; we now have to look at a 120 days because, as Mr. Long said, if we got to move not only patients, we might have to move residents and so we now have to start thinking about the 10,600 people who are part of the emergency program. If they don't get a roof on and they're under a blue roof, and we have to move them, we now have to start to think of making decisions."

Ms. Barnes said the vulnerability of residents whose homes have on blue roofs meant part of the consideration must include evacuation. Pressed by The Consortium to give a concise answer on the evacuation option, Ms. Barnes said, "I'm saying it's something that we would have to look at." Mr. Long added, "Evacuation off an island is never optimal. The goal is shelter in place first, and then to be able to maximize the shelter and capacity, and that's what we're here doing everyday."

Still, if a storm were to threaten the territory in the next few days, there would not be enough shelters to house residents, and Virgin Islanders would most likely have to be evacuated.



From left: William Vogel, FEMA Coordinating Officer for Region II, and William "Brock" Long, FEMA administrator (Credit: Ernice Gilbert, VIC)

To that end and with no major storms currently forecast, Mr. Vogel said F.E.M.A. has been assisting the territory in finding ways to expedite release of the \$186 million for the home repairs program so that residents' homes could be repaired before potential hurricanes. Asked directly whether the local government, even in light of its inability to cover the upfront costs, would receive the hundreds of millions allocated to the territory for the repairs, Mr. Vogel said "we have no concerns" that the monies will be released.

"We can write certain projects where we do what they call expedited project worksheets. And in that project worksheet for that project, we can take some of the money and we can obligate it to the territory as soon as we understand exactly what the entire project is going to look like," Mr. Vogel explained. "We can take 50 percent of the total amount of money for that project, write this expedited project worksheet, the territory agrees with what it is that we have come up with on this project worksheet, and then obligate the money to the territory -- and that money is available in the territory's smartlink account for them to be able to use towards recovery or restoration."

In a letter to Mr. Long on Tuesday, Mr. Mapp said, "I am imploring you to act now and help us to pre-position immediate sheltering options for the people of the Virgin Islands as we brace for what is expected to be another busy hurricane season. We are asking you to consider all possibilities, including preparing to provide aircraft and cruise ships in advance of a storm to evacuate as many people as feasible to safety until the storm passes."

During the press briefing, Mr. Long lauded the Mapp administration and its efforts following the two Category 5 hurricanes in 2017, and the government's continued work in preparing the U.S.V.I. for the current season. He said F.E.M.A. had provided over \$20 billion in federal funding around the U.S. and its territories following last year's hurricanes and other natural disasters -- including the California fires -- with \$1.6 billion already provided to the U.S. Virgin Islands.

The administrator also committed F.E.M.A.'s presence in the territory for additional years to facilitate the recovery.