

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Only '2 or 3' Sheltering Facilities Ready To House Residents Territory-Wide In Case Of A Hurricane, VITEMA Says

Disaster Recovery / **Published On June 22, 2018 10:14 AM /**

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Before Hurricanes Irma and Maria walloped the U.S. Virgin Islands in September of 2107, the territory had a number of facilities to house residents whose homes were damaged by the Category 5 storms. But Irma and Maria made unusable most of the buildings that were considered shelters, and with the 2018 hurricane season near a month in, the U.S. Virgin Islands does not have enough sheltering facilities for the thousands of Virgin Islands who will need housing if a storm were to hit.

Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency (V.I.T.E.M.A.) Director, Mona Barnes, said on Wednesday during a press conference with F.E.M.A. Administrator William Long and F.E.M.A. Coordinating Officer for Region II, William Vogel, that out of the 20 facilities examined by V.I.T.E.M.A. to determine whether they were suitable to serve as shelters, only 2 or 3 were deemed acceptable.

Mr. Long, in responding to a question from The Consortium highlighting the problem, said the sheltering issue is a problem that the federal agency has been working with the local government to fix.

"That was a large part of the problem that we're trying to overcome," Mr. Long said. "So sheltering is a local responsibility first, and optimal disaster response and recovery is locally executed, state-managed and federally supported. So what F.E.M.A. can do is provide money and facilitate the rapid repairs to the facilities as quickly as we can.

Mr. Long added, "Problem is, with the extent of the damage, we recognize that there's going to be a higher shelter demand as a result of people's homes being damaged and not being able to get a permanent roof structure on there homes. And what we're trying to do is expedite the STEP program in conjunction to make sure that we're trying to get as many roofs put on so that people can shelter in place, and if not we look at what we can do in the midterm to fix the schools as quickly as we can to be able to provide safe shelters. It's a complex problem that we're working on."

The STEP program Mr. Long referred to is locally called the Emergency Home Repairs VI Program. On January 31, [the governor announced that \\$766 million had been set aside](#) for the territory by F.E.M.A. to help homeowners whose homes were affected by either Hurricane Irma or Maria, or both, but did not qualify for other home repair assistance from F.E.M.A. "That program is expected to put an average of \$25,000 in over 12,000 homes in the Virgin Islands for immediate repairs," the governor said. On Wednesday, Ms. Barnes revealed that roughly 10,600 residents had applied for assistance through the program.

What Mr. Mapp did not reveal was that the federal program included a clause that sees the local government paying the costs of the projects upfront, with F.E.M.A. reimbursing the full amount upon completion. And because the local government has been cash-strapped for a number of years, it has been unable to meet the costs, a problem that has stalled the STEP program's effectiveness -- with only \$13.6 million of the \$186 million already allocated being received as of Tuesday, according to Mr. Vogel.

On Wednesday, however, Mr. Vogel said he was not concerned about the funds as there are workarounds that he said can be initiated to hasten the release of the money. "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."

Nonetheless, if another hurricane were to threaten the U.S.V.I. in the coming days or weeks, considering the present situation, there would be little recourse aside from moving people out of the islands to more secure destinations.

This was confirmed by Ms. Barnes, who 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.”

Mr. Mapp has been upfront with F.E.M.A. in recognizing the magnitude of the problem, and has requested help. In letter shared with Mr. Long on Tuesday, the governor wrote, “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.”

Feature Image: Residents walking near the Nisky Center in St. Thomas following the passage of Hurricane Irma. (Credit: [Reemy-Reemz Photography](#))