

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Human Services Agrees To Pay Behavioral Services, Saving, For Now, Homes For At-Risk Children

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Ernice Gilbert **June 23, 2018**



ST. CROIX -- For over three hours on Friday at the Superior Court here, attorneys representing the Virgin Islands Volunteer Advocates for Children, Inc., (V.I.V.A.) -- a nonprofit organization on St. Croix that represents abused and neglected children -- and government attorneys defending the Department of Human Services, deliberated to forge an agreement that in the end included payment to the Virgin Islands Behavioral Services (V.I.B.S.), a company that has for years operated multiple behavioral services in the territory housing patients from both districts, which was on the verge of shutting down because of millions of dollars owed to it by the Government of the Virgin Islands.

According to D.H.S. Commissioner Felicia Blyden, D.H.S. will pay within the upcoming week all that is owed to V.I.B.S., an amount Senator Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly [revealed to be roughly \\$4.8 million](#). V.I.B.S. had abruptly decided to shut down all its operations in the territory -- which includes the 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. V.I.B.S. had given no reason for its closure, although it was widely known that the company was leaving because of nonpayment.

While discussions were being had between the two parties in court on Friday, Ms. Blyden told The Consortium it was always D.H.S.'s intention to pay V.I.B.S., and that funding was never an issue, as the funds for V.I.B.S. were included in D.H.S.'s budget. But, she said, there were certain issues with the contract that caused the hold up. (While in court during a break, a government attorney along with Ms. Blyden and another representative, could be heard discussing the swiftest route to making payments to V.I.B.S.)

The commissioner said the agreement reached also included language that extends the stay of V.I.B.S. in the territory. V.I.B.S., whose parent company is the Fortune 500 firm [Universal Health Care Services, Inc.](#), was set to shut its doors in the U.S. Virgin Islands in less than two weeks. It was not clear whether a long-term deal with the company would be sought.

The lawsuit filed by V.I.V.A. sought 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. It named as defendants Governor Kenneth Mapp, Office of Management and Budget Director Julio Rhymer, and Ms. Blyden.

Superior Court Judge Douglas A. Brady, who is overseeing the case, said during a hearing on Monday that since 1993, it has been the territory's policy to concentrate on children's problems as the most important strategy. Judge Brady's words suggested that whatever discussions were being held, the end result should be beneficial to the affected minors.

Gail Shearer, executive director of V.I.V.A., said in a release issued a week ago that news of V.I.B.S.'s pending closure had caused fear among patients.

"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," Ms. Shearer said. "Social workers at the Department of Human Services are encouraging children and their representatives to contact Assistant Commissioner Janet Turnbull Kriegger 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."

Ms. Shearer said the abruptness of the closure announcement had created a crisis situation, and that alternative placements were 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.

Friday's agreement will help ease anxieties among those affected, but D.H.S. has yet to explain its long-term plan for the critically important services.

