

The Virgin Islands Consortium

AG Walker To AIG: Repair Damaged Bellevue Homes In St. John Immediately

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ST. JOHN -- Attorney General Claude Walker on Saturday wrote a letter addressed to the president of the American Insurance Group's affordable housing unit, to express his concerns about the conditions under which the residents of Bellevue Village in St. John are living, according to the letter which was obtained by The Consortium. Bellevue Village is owned by the giant U.S.-based insurance firm, which was bailed out during the Obama administration with \$180 billion of taxpayer money.

When Hurricanes Irma and Maria struck the U.S. Virgin Islands, the Bellevue community in St. John -- as with many other properties on the small island -- was badly damaged. Some of the damage caused by the storms, according to the letter, included lost ceilings,

blown-out windows and damaged porch railings. The residents have also seen the proliferation of mold in their homes, infestation of termites and cockroaches, missing cabinets, dilapidated appliances, cracked tiles and damaged locks. And the units do not have hurricane shutters, leaving residents, already residing in vulnerable and damaged structures, exposed to potential storms.

"I am writing to request that the American Insurance Group, Affordable Housing, take immediate action to rehabilitate its property known as Bellevue Village," Mr. Walker wrote. "Many Bellevue units have sustained severe damage due to the 2017 hurricanes that hit the U.S. Virgin Islands. While some period for recovery is understandable, the residents continue to suffer substantial deprivations and hardships."

The attorney general said Bellevue residents have formed a group known as the Bellevue Village Tenants Association, which has received a verbal commitment from A.I.G. for short-term rent abatement. But A.I.G. "must immediately take action to rehabilitate these units to meet standards of habitability," Mr. Walker wrote.

Renters with five or more units in the U.S. Virgin Islands must abide by Virgin Islands code as it relates to lodging. This means the apartments, homes, condos, or hotel rooms, among other lodging facilities, must provide facilities that are safe and sanitary, and provide basic needs. Mr. Walker said A.I.G.'s failure to conduct necessary repairs "may violate the consumer protection laws of the Virgin Islands." He said the habitability issues of the units can be remedied quickly and without further major disruptions to residents.

Mr. Walker gave A.I.G. 14 days to submit to him an acceptable rehabilitation plan with a firm schedule for repairs. "You must also keep residents informed of your plans and deadlines," Mr. Walker wrote. "A.I.G. must make all repairs to Bellevue in a fit, reasonably safe and habitable condition for the residents."

The attorney general made mention in his letter to A.I.G. the limited housing stock in St. John, and the difficulty in relocating elsewhere. "Furthermore," he added, "they do not want to live anywhere else because Bellevue is their home. They continue to pay their rent to you despite the conditions in which they have been forced to live for nearly a year."

Mr. Walker concluded, "A.I.G. is one of the largest financial services and insurance companies in the world, and so you have the resources to address the intolerable conditions of Bellevue's residents, and to meet your obligations to provide safe and fit housing."

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