

The Virgin Islands Consortium

DHS Knew Of Behavioral Services' Plan To Shut Down For Over A Year, Rivera-O'Reilly Says

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Senator Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly.

It took a lawsuit to force the Government of the Virgin Islands, through the Department of Human Services, to pay its debt to the Virgin Islands Behavioral Services (V.I.B.S.). And while D.H.S. is now searching for alternatives to house the at-risk youth that V.I.B.S. has serviced with its multiple behavioral facilities in the territory, D.H.S. was notified of V.I.B.S.'s impending closure over a year ago.

That's according to Senator Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly, who wrote to Governor Kenneth Mapp on Monday to bring to his attention the plethora of inefficiencies threatening the department, and have already caused D.H.S. to lose hundreds of thousands of federal dollars.

The Consortium has been covering court developments relative to V.I.B.S.'s planned closure. In court on Friday, D.H.S. Commissioner Felicia Blyden told this publication that D.H.S. would this week pay in full the amount owed to V.I.B.S., which is estimated to be \$4.8 million, according to Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly. Ms. Blyden said D.H.S. had the funds to pay all along, but that a contract dispute had forced delays. And she said the agreement to pay, though it did not secure V.I.B.S.'s services in the long-term, would keep V.I.B.S.'s doors open beyond its closure date -- this week -- perhaps for a transition period. Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly on Tuesday morning told The Consortium that if D.H.S. pays what it due to V.I.B.S., the firm will keep its services operational in the territory through September.

"Essentially, it took a court action for Human Services to expedite payment," the senator said. "There was no serious attempt by the leadership of the department to engage V.I.B.S. in a robust discussion about extending services."

The commissioner, however, did not reveal that she knew for over a year of V.I.B.S.'s plan to shutdown, but it was revealed by Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly in a statement to The Consortium on the present state of affairs at D.H.S.

"The closure of V.I.B.S. crystallized for me the sad reality that the department is woefully deficient and unable to tackle both small and large issues. In March 2017, V.I.B.S. informed the department that it would be closing its doors. As recent as Friday, Commissioner Blyden and her staff still did not have a written plan for the transition of these children. This is simply unconscionable. Frankly I am tired of people meeting and talking and making excuses. When you accept a job as a commissioner you have to be prepared to make decisions and to get things done. The responses provided during the budget hearing are just another example of a department that is on a collision path and refuses to change course," Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly said.