

The Virgin Islands Consortium

DHS Senior Citizens Division Employees Take Job Action In Protest Of 'Unbearable' Working Conditions

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ST. CROIX -- Department of Human Services employees on St. Croix working in the Division of Senior Citizens Affairs, took a job action today by not reporting to work at the Richmond Senior Citizen Center or the Herbert Grigg Home for the Aged, a move the employees hope will capture the attention of D.H.S. Commissioner Felicia Blyden along with Governor Kenneth Mapp, and compel them to address what the employees described as "unbearable" working conditions 10 months after Hurricane Maria walloped the island.

Today's action appeared to be well planned; it came with an accompanying letter that detailed the horrendous working conditions at both facilities.

"We, the staff of the Division of Senior Citizens Affairs of the Department of Human Services are bringing forth the following concerns. It has been 10 months following Hurricane Maria and the conditions under which we find ourselves working have become unbearable," reads the letter. "We have been working tirelessly to meet the needs of our clients, but there are major issues that we deal with daily that have been going unaddressed.

"We are frustrated and only seek the basic requirements needed in order to adequately perform our jobs and to serve our clients who we care for dearly. We have been asking repeatedly for problematic issues to be addressed, but we have received no response."

The Consortium reached out to Ms. Blyden today at 10:20 a.m. for comment on the job action and other issues at D.H.S., but the commissioner, at time of writing, had yet to respond.

Below is a list of complaints compiled by the employees of the Division of Senior Citizens Affairs that have yet to be addressed.

Electrical Issues

- All rooms of the temporary offices of Herbert Grigg Home (HGH) and the HGH kitchen have numerous non-functioning power outlets.
- The breakers trip at various times during the day due to electrical overloads.
- The kitchen has gone through 4 blenders that have gone bad due to electrical surges. The blenders are necessary to puree foods needed for certain HGH residents who cannot eat regular food

Mold

- Employees at Richmond Center, including Intake and Referral, have suffered severe respiratory illnesses related to mold.
- The entire section of HGH that contains displaced SCA workers needs to be tested for mold.

Vermin/Pests

- There is a rodent problem in the section of HGH containing the displaced workers.
- Ants and lizards roam freely throughout the building due to access from the outside caused by structural issues

Air Conditioning

- The majority of the "offices" housing displaced workers have no air conditioning. Concentrating is difficult under such conditions. Fans simply blow hot air, blow papers around, and serve little useful purpose.

Programs Lacking Sufficient Computers

- Homemakers
- Information and Referral (I & R)
- Caregivers

Programs Lacking Sufficient Number of Workable Printers / Shortage of ink cartridges

- All programs rely heavily on the ability to print forms necessary to conduct daily tasks. This is severely hampering the ability of employee to conduct business in an efficient and effective manner.

Lack of WiFi Connectivity

- A limited number of mobile hotspots are available to be shared among all the displaced workers. This affects the ability to send and receive emails and also to access other internet-related service needed to perform job duties.

Lack of Telephones

- There is one cell phone being shared among all displaced workers of all programs. All employees have been using their personal cell phones to conduct DHS business. At times, due to poor connectivity and dropped calls, employees have to go outside to make and/or receive phone calls

Plumbing

- The ceiling in the room of the SCA Coordinator has been leaking since the move in date. A quote has been provided for repair, but 10 months later, the issue remains unresolved.
- On Wednesday, July 18, the SCSEP bathroom pipe broke, flooding the office.

Vehicles

- Information and Referral (housed at the Richmond Center) has no transportation.
- The Homemaker's Program is in desperate need of transportation in order to do assessments and follow-up visits.
- Most programs have to share transportation (e.g. Meals on Wheels) affecting the timeliness of addressing critical client issues.
- Employees, on occasion, utilize their own vehicles to conduct job duties.

Food Shortage - HGH

- The kitchen at HGH is lacking basic food items needed to prepare nutritional foods for residents. These include:
 - Bread, eggs, potatoes, crackers, onions, green peppers/red peppers, celery, parsley, general seasonings, provisions, fresh fruits, fresh vegetables, oatmeal, cream of wheat
- The kitchen manager and cooks use their own money to purchase food items so that the residents can have flavorful meals.
- The menu, which is needed to provide therapeutic diets to residents with chronic diseases cannot be followed due to lack of necessary food items.

Late Vendor Payments

- Meals on Wheels

- Information and Referral
- Caregiver Program

Security Related to Money Being Received

- Information and Referral receives money, but there is no security to protect employee.

Inadequate Office Space

- All programs are affected
- Overhead lighting is minimal or non-existent in many offices in the temporary HGH office location. Poor lighting affects the ability to focus and concentrate.
- The Adult Protection Services "office" is located in an old information kiosk.
- The information being shared by clients, as mandated by the Federal Government, is confidential in nature. There is very little privacy that is afforded in any of the offices, leaving employees no alternative but to go outside to make sensitive calls.

Issues Specific to the Herbert Grigg Home for the Aged

- Certified Nursing Assistant shortage. The ratio is presently 1 CNA to 9 residents.
- There is presently no contract in place for licensed staff.
- Human Resources fails to meet with licensed staff to discuss the transition
- There is roof damage in the dining and conference room area of the kitchen, causing staff to work 6 hours shifts. No word as to when funding is available.
- There is a staff shortage in the kitchen with cooks working more than 6 days in a row.
- Frequent power outages with no generator, placing residents at risk. There has been no information as to funding availability.
- Resident admissions have been frozen due to staff shortage. There are 10 beds available, but they are left empty due to staff shortage.

The employees ended the letter by reinforcing their dedication to the seniors that they serve. "We have done our best in the 10 months following Hurricane Maria, but we need to have the many items that we have listed addressed," reads the letter. "We feel that there is a lack of appropriate guidance and leadership, and as a result, we are frustrated and tired. We have requested meetings with those who can make the decisions needed to improve our conditions. Despite numerous requests to meet, there has been no evidence of an assessment being completed by the executive team. More importantly, no plans for the future have been discussed with us.

"With hurricane season underway, this is extremely troubling. All that we ask is for our voices to be heard and answers be provided to our list of concerns. We don't expect them to be fixed overnight, but we would appreciate being given a plan so that we can see some semblance of light at the end of the tunnel," the letter concluded.

Feature Image: A picture of the Richmond Senior Citizens Center taken today. (Credit: VIC)

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