

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Nonprofits Facing Severe Operational Problems As D.H.S. Fails To Release Critical Funding

Health / **Published On March 08, 2019 08:15 AM /**

Ernice Gilbert **March 08, 2019**



A number of nonprofit organizations servicing some of the most vulnerable parts of the Virgin Islands community may have be forced to greatly scale back their operations and, in some cases, even shut down, as critical funding that is supposed to be released through the Department of Human Services has failed to manifest, with D.H.S. owing hundreds of thousands in combined funding to these operations.

This information was revealed during a Committee on Health, Hospitals and Human Services hearing held at the Cardiac Center on St. Croix Thursday.

From The Women's Coalition of St. Croix (WCSC), which has been servicing victims of crime since its inception in 1981, to Ten Thousand Helpers, which focuses on assisting mentally ill men, the nonprofits all had at least one similar line in their testimony in common: D.H.S. has failed to timely fund their operations as required by law, a failure that was affecting their services, and in turn the vulnerable who need them.

After going through a long list of important work Women's Coalition performs, the nonprofit's executive director, Clema S. Lewis, said, "Our funding through the Virgin Islands government remains unstable, unreliable and undependable. None of the three grants that the Women's Coalition receives through the VI Department of Human Services have been signed or executed for Fiscal Year 2019. Here we are, in March of 2019, almost a full six months into the fiscal year, without executed grants and without any promise of payment. We are owed approximately \$140,000 from the Department of Human Services for Fiscal Year 2019. This is a hardship for us. For smaller nonprofits with whom we partner, like the Men's Coalition, this is hardship which could easily result in agency closure and the end of vital services."

Ms. Lewis added, "The VI Department of Human Services also owes the Women's Coalition of St. Croix payment for services rendered in Fiscal Year 2018. This includes \$100,000 for a Crisis Intervention Grant and \$29,226 for a Sexual Assault Services Program Grant. Both of these grants were signed and all of the invoices for payment have been submitted, multiple times. For FY2018 and 2019 combined, WCSC is owed approximately \$270,000."

Even so, Ms. Lewis went on, "we continue to do the work."

Malik A. Stridiron, program and operational director of Ten Thousand Helpers (TTH), said, "The timely receipt of funds from the Department of Human Services is a grave concern. Since this is our major funding source, payment of utilities and salaries are jeopardized. Today, as I deliver this testimony, TTH is at risk of closing since the last 2 quarterly allotments have not been received."

The Village Virgin Islands Partners in Recovery (called The Village), which is the only residential treatment facility in the territory, told a similar story at the Thursday hearing.

"Our local funding has been decreasing and payments are sporadic at best. Today we are waiting for DHS payments incurred in 2017 amounting to \$70,000. We are also waiting on DHS payments from 2018 amounting to \$220,000. We have no DHS contracts, including a contract for General Fund allocation, for the current fiscal year and are presently operating on good faith. That good faith is being severely tested," said a representative of The Village, who testified on behalf of the nonprofit's vice president, Larry McArthur. "We have had to rely on our parent organization, Westcare Foundation, to obtain loans from its line of credit to continue operations. At this time those funds have been exhausted. And even if we do receive the outstanding payments, that amount will not cover the interest accrued from the use of this line of credit."

Part of the issue of nonpayment to these and other nonprofits stems from a lack of employees, Department of Human Services Acting Commissioner, Felecia Blyden, hinted during her testimony. She said D.H.S. as of Thursday had 705 employees and 87 vacancies. Of the 87 vacancies, 38 are locally funded while 49 are sustained by the

federal government. Ms. Blyden said the department recently hired an administrator and chief financial officer, which should help with the signing of contracts. She also revealed that D.H.S. had 47 contracts, 37 of which were in the process of being renewed.

The department has faced a number of issues in the wake of Hurricanes Irma and Maria, which tore through the territory in 2017. One of the most daunting problems was the forced relocation of D.H.S.'s St. Croix Golden Rock office. According to Ms. Blyden, the move affected the department's Office of Human Resources, Labor Relation, Intake and Emergency Services, Adult Protective Services, Fiscal, Senior Citizens Affairs, Meals on Wheels, Disabilities and Vocational Services, Division of Family Assistance, Quality Control and Fraud Unit, Management Information System, and the Office of Child Care and Regulatory Services.

Ms. Blyden said while these programs were relocated to other D.H.S. locations on island, the "forced decentralization" created a significant inconvenience for residents and inefficiency of program operations.

The problem of nonpayment and other inefficiencies at the department, it appears, is being caused by a number of reasons. One of those reasons, according to Senator Kurt Vialet, was the lack of implementation of funds by the executive branch of government, because the Senate has consistently appropriated funding, he said.

Ms. Blyden and her senior staff were not immune from criticism. Senators assailed department officials for the failure that seems to be the Youth Rehabilitation Center on St. Croix. And Senator Kenneth Gittens questioned Ms. Blyden about office spaces, to which she responded that the department was actively seeking to secure modular units. The response appeared to have struck Mr. Gittens wrong, who noted that it had been 18 months after the storms of 2017 and there appeared to be no tangible work on modular units installation for D.H.S.

Senators present at Thursday's hearing were Chairman, Oakland Benta, Sr., Alicia Barnes, Marvin Blyden, Allison DeGazon, Novelle Francis, Jr., Mr. Gittens, Stedmann Hodge, Sr., Janelle Sarauw, Athneil "Bobby" Thomas, Donna Frett-Gregory, and Mr. Vialet.