

The Virgin Islands Consortium

First Responder Departments And Agencies Express Readiness For 2019 Hurricane Season At Senate Hearing

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Ernice Gilbert **June 20, 2019**



A number of government departments and agencies invited to testify in a Committee on Government Operations, Consumer Affairs, Energy, Environment and Planning on Wednesday told lawmakers that they working to be fully prepared in case of a hurricane.

WAPA CEO Lawrence Kupfer said the semiautonomous entity had learned from the 2017 storms and is now better prepared.

Department of Public Works said it has executed contracts in preparation, and said it was ready to distribute sandbags ahead of a hurricane if needed. D.P.W. also said it has strategically positioned heavy equipment throughout the islands for immediate aftermath response.

The V.I.P.D. said it's prepared to respond if a state of emergency is declared by the territory's governor. Part of the plan includes using peace officers to assist police officers with checkpoints and curfew hours enforcement.

The Department of Health said it's working with VITEMA and the Department of Human Services to create a system that ensures patient tracking and evacuation to the U.S. mainland. D.O.H. also said it would position behavioral and mental health staff at shelters to assist.

D.H.S. said it was ready to distribute emergency supplies and to assist with temporary housing for those who become homeless.

Senator Novelle Francis said while planning is expected, the real goal is to properly execute. "It's apparent that there's some government preparation by government entities. But the ability to execute the plan has been problematic in the past," he said.

VITEMA said did not complete an action report from each of the first responders that were involved in the immediate aftermath of the 2017 storms. "What we did was an internal after-action on VITEMA's performance and what we needed to correct internally," said VITEMA's Denise Lewis. During storms, VITEMA is the lead agency under which all other government-owned entities operate.

Senator Alicia Barnes reminded the testifiers of the importance of Wednesday's meeting. "We just came out of two major storms, Irma and Maria, and hurricane preparedness and just emergency preparedness and planning, one of the key components is assessing -- making a determination as to how you performed and then determining how you move forward addressing those deficiencies so that mistakes would not be made moving forward," she said. Ms. Barnes said she was hoping to hear from VITEMA Director Nominee Daryl D. Jaschen on what the department had learned following Irma and Maria.

Senator Javan James requested that the government put in place a plan to protect government assets ahead of impending storms.

Mr. Jaschen said the territory could sustain itself for ten days in terms of commodities and other emergency needs following a destructive storm, which he said was sufficient time for the restocking of supplies from the U.S. mainland if Puerto Rico couldn't help.

WAPA said linemen are trained and ready to respond in case of a storm. "There is a continuous implementation of preventative maintenance programs, repairs and hardening of both internal and external facilities and infrastructure. Also in place is an active public outreach and messaging systems, and WAPA has developed a structured management system to control both planning and preparedness programs, inclusive of restoration initiatives and priorities," Mr. Kupfer said.

Still, not all lawmakers were satisfied with the level of preparedness. Ms. Barnes highlighted the current state of emergency shelters in the territory, stating that the USVI is more vulnerable than before Irma and Maria struck in 2017, as many homes are still damaged from the storms, though they are occupied. If another storm were to strike, these homes, already fragile, could easily become unlivable -- which means the territory, now more than ever, needs more shelters.

But shelters are few and even those announced as safe places have deficiencies:

- **St. Thomas** – Department of Human Services Head Start Center, Sugar Estate and Lockhart Elementary School, 41 Estate Thomas
- **St. Croix** – Department of Human Services Head Start Center, Mars Hill, Frederiksted and St. Croix Educational Complex, 5A&C VICorp (across from the University of the Virgin Islands)
- **St. John** – Calabash Boom Community Center
- **Water Island** – Water Island Fire Station.