

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Unlicensed Contractors Still Plague VI Homeowners

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Shoddy repair work done by unlicensed contractors following hurricanes Irma and Maria continues to cause headaches for Virgin Islands homeowners.

Department of Licensing and Consumer Affairs (DLCA) Commissioner Richard Evangelista told a group of lawmakers last week that the DLCA "... continues to see a large number of disputes between homeowners and contractors" nearly two years after the two Category 5 storms devastated the territory. "In many of these cases, the workmen performing the repairs are not licensed," Mr. Evangelista said.

From October 2018 through June 30th, at least 118 consumer complaints were referred to the DLCA Legal Division for prosecution. The vast majority of the cases were disputes

between homeowners and contractors. “Because of the intricate nature and vast sums of money involved in some of these cases, 24 of them had to be referred to Superior Court in civil actions,” Mr. Evangelista said. Of the remaining 96 cases, 55 were held over for administrative hearings, with 46 resolved in favor of the consumer or homeowner. Forty-one cases were resolved without the need for a formal hearing, the commissioner said.

Mr. Evangelista outlined the ongoing issues Virgin Islands homeowners face in dealing with property repairs in a territory inundated with unlicensed, and sometimes unscrupulous, contractors after the storms. DCLA officials appeared before the VI Senate Finance Committee on Tuesday on St. Croix to defend its Fiscal Year 2020 budget requests.

The DLCA regulates professional licensing for tradesmen, such as construction contractors, electricians, carpenters, plumbers, HVAC mechanics and others involved in home repairs. VI law requires tradesmen in those professions to sit for written and practical licensing exams to ensure the contractors possess sufficient knowledge, technical training and administrative ability to perform work that is safe and of sound quality.

Mr. Evangelista offered a few words of advice to property owners. “Refrain from using unlicensed contractors. Please contact the department (DLCA) to see if the contractor is licensed.”

Homeowners can visit the DLCA website at www.dlca.vi.gov to search for licensed contractors. The VI Consortium also has [a link](#) to a list of more than 315 DLCA-licensed constructions contractors on all three islands.

More than 22,000 households on St. Thomas, St. Croix and St. John – representing 52 percent of private homes – suffered some form of damage, according to a 2018 report by the USVI Hurricane Recovery and Resilience Task Force. The impact of the hurricanes on the territory’s housing stock alone is estimated to be more than \$2.5 billion.

The scope of damage and acute shortage of skilled, licensed tradesmen left homeowners with the difficult choice between hiring a contractor of questionable skill and leaving work undone.

Even when licensed professionals were hired, some homeowners still could not catch a break. At least 10 Virgin Islanders whose homes were repaired through the Federal Emergency Repair Home Program, found themselves with construction liens placed on their homes by a subcontractor working in the program, Government House said last month.

The company alleged the primary federal contractor, AECOM, had not paid it for repairs done to homes in the territory. The company used liens on the homeowners’ property as a wedge to force payment by AECOM. “While (the subcontractor) knows that these homeowners are not responsible for any payments to any of the almost 100 contractors participating in the federally funded housing repair program, this subcontractor is ruthlessly using storm victims as a means to an end, and I am committed to leading our administration’s efforts toward ensuring this practice ends,” Gov. Albert Bryan said in a prepared statement.

