

The Virgin Islands Consortium

DHS Continues To Struggle With Staff Shortages Following 2017 Hurricanes: 188 Vacancies Persist

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The V.I. Department of Human Services is struggling with staff shortages caused, in part, by the loss employees after 2017 hurricanes.

The department is down 20 percent of its workforce, D.H.S. officials told lawmakers at a Senate Finance Committee hearing last week, D.H.S. Commissioner-Designee Kimberley Causey-Gomez said staffing problems could jeopardize federal funding – and services to the territory’s most needy citizens.

“Our staff shortages directly impacts the service delivery in our programs and may potentially jeopardize federal funds,” she said.

On paper, D.H.S. has 865 employee positions. Mrs. Causey-Gomez said 188 of those positions are vacant. Many Virgin Islanders – including government employees – fled the devastated territory following Hurricanes Irma and Maria. That flow of residents and workforce to the mainland made worse the territory's ongoing population decline of the past decade.

"We have struggled with local budget cuts and federal cuts (which) have caused continued staff shortages, insufficient space to serve our vulnerable populations, and service reductions," Mrs. Causey-Gomez said "We are still in recovery mode."

Human Services is one of the largest Virgin Islands government departments. Hundreds of active employees are spread over 12 divisions and 84 programs intended to meet thousands of Virgin Islanders' health and welfare needs. It has a \$172 million budget. The federal government pays a 60 percent of that amount. Local taxpayers pick up the rest.

Sen. Marvin A. Blyden said personnel matters are critical among "all of the issues we are looking at (in DHS)." Mr. Blyden pushed timeline on filling open jobs.

Chief Financial Officer Charmaine Modeste-Antoine told Finance Committee members that 132 of the 188 job openings are considered "critical vacancies." She said 22 of those "critical vacancies" are nursing positions, 12 are social worker positions. "We are actively and aggressively trying to bring nurses on board."

There are 50 job vacancies in the SNAP program that the department is "... aggressively trying to fill," Mrs. Modeste-Antoine said. "We have SNAP monies that have not been used due to the vacancies. We lost staff after the hurricane. We are trying to build back that staff for eligibility (of federal dollars)."

It is unclear if D.H.S. is doing all it can to fill those empty desks.

A review Saturday of the [Careers page of the Division of Personnel website](#) found a total of seven D.H.S. jobs posted. Four of the job listings were for nurses. The others include a human resources generalist and custodial worker.

Mrs. Modeste-Antoine said there are 12 social worker positions available, including one on St. John. None of those jobs are posted on the Division of Personnel website as of Saturday morning.

Underpaid, Overworked

Irma and Maria didn't create all of D.H.S.'s problems. Poor morale in the department has lent to some empty desks around the D.H.S. offices. Mrs. Causey-Gomez described low pay, a lack of internal communications and the "lack of consistent professional development" as issues for senior department managers to address.

She said a plan to tackle the deficiencies must include senior management in the D.H.S. divisions.

So far this fiscal year, D.H.S. has indeed hired 62 staffers. There were 35 separations, including 16 retirements, Mrs. Causey-Gomez said. The D.H.S. proposed budget asks for \$21.2 million in personnel costs for FY2020. Of that amount, D.H.S. requested \$9.7

million for fringe benefits.

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