

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Department of Human Services gave a status update on the Youth Rehabilitation Center during Youth, Sports, Parks and Recreation hearing on Monday

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Carla Benjamin, an Assistant Commissioner at the Virgin Islands Department of Human Services (DHS), came before the Committee on Youth, Sports, Parks and Recreation to present testimony on the current status of the Youth Rehabilitation Center (YRC), the current programs available to their male and female residents, and the various challenges the rehabilitation center is currently experiencing.

YRC is the only secured detention facility in the territory providing detainment for youth remanded by the Superior Court of the Virgin Islands in both districts. The center houses

youth on pre-trial status, youth that have been adjudicated delinquents, and youth legally transferred to adult status for committing serious felonies. The facility has 23 rooms with bunk beds for males in the secured area called the courtyard, which is the original housing area at YRC. There are also 22 beds for males in the dormitory called the Annex, which is sectioned into two pods. Females are housed in a secure three (3) bed area called Intake.

Ms. Benjamin noted in her testimony that due to the current pandemic, the male residents had been moved to the Annex. The courtyard is used exclusively for quarantine purposes for new male admissions, and female residents would be quarantined in Intake. The new male residents who come to the facility positive for the virus would remain in the courtyard for two weeks, where their temperatures and symptoms will be monitored and checked daily by a nurse; moreover, if a male resident arrives with a negative COVID test that resident would only be quarantined for five (5) days where a nurse will also check their temperature and monitor them for symptoms. After the male resident is deemed safe, he will be relocated to the Annex with the other male residents.

Ms. Benjamin stated that access to the facility had been prohibited to everyone except for residents and YRC staff. Anyone entering the facility is subject to temperature screening. In addition to temperature screening, YRC staff must complete daily self-screening surveys to enter the facility. Since March 2020, all in-person visits at the facility have been suspended. Only approved delivery persons, vendors, and contractors can come on campus to conduct business after a successful temperature screening.

Sen. Dwayne DeGraff queried if regular testing was being conducted on YRC staff. Ms. Benjamin did admit to the Committee that not everyone who is apart of the team wants to be tested. She explained that the last time the staff was tested was in August, and everyone came out negative. Ms. Benjamin said, "while we do attempt to test proactively as a preventive measure- that at times causes some challenges with regard to folks having the option to not want to test if they don't want to test." "We are working collaboratively with our staff and with the union to try to make sure that we can get recurrent testing done," Ms. Benjamin added.

Even though YRC is a rehabilitation center, the Department of Education still administers free public education to the residents. Ms. Benjamin said, "while at YRC, residents receive instruction on-site via a Department of Education program called Youth On The Rise. This is a complete program including a Principal and multiple Instructors." She added, "residents can graduate from Youth On The Rise with a diploma, others continue to have a home school, and they receive education credit for schooling while at YRC."

Throughout the hearing, Ms. Benjamin divulged to senators that structural renovations are needed at the YRC to address the many electrical and plumbing issues that afflict the facility. She added that aesthetically, the facility is not exciting, outlining that the plaster on the structure is cracked in places and has fallen off in other areas. Furthermore, Ms. Benjamin stated that the original building was designed during a time when cells were acceptable. She further explained that the building is old and is not designed in a satisfactory manner based upon current best practice standards. "It was designed as a penal facility; it is no longer okay to house juveniles in that type of confinement," said Ms. Benjamin.

When asked what some of the challenges were the YRC has been experienced as a result of the global pandemic, Ms. Benjamin specified that the facility has problems with their phone system and the connectivity in the building. At the moment, there is limited phone service at YRC, except for the use of 2 extensions and a cell phone. Nonetheless, Ms. Benjamin assured senators that the Department's Management Information System (MIS) division is working towards adding additional extensions until the entire system can be restored. When it comes to the connectivity at the YRC, there is limited connectivity in the building. "The use of wi-fi is being augmented by use of data cards (hot spots) to boost access," said Ms. Benjamin. She added that MIS is also responsible for Improving connectivity/ access to areas on the facility with poor reception will require additional equipment.

During Sen. Janelle Sarauw's line of questioning, she inquired on whether the DHS was eligible for FEMA funding to repair YRC's structure. Ms. Benjamin clarified that the funding YRC was qualified for was specific to flood mitigation and some repairs to the Annex, which is where the residents currently reside; however, those funds have already been expanding, as reported by Ms. Benjamin.

Ms. Benjamin continued by stating that during the 30th Legislature, lawmakers passed Act 7697 on September 14, 2014, which appropriated \$3,072,600 to YRC for the construction of four new buildings. Soon after passing the Bill, then-Governor John P. de Jongh, Jr signed it into law.

However, as stated by Ms. Benjamin, while the department was researching the status of the appropriated funds, DHS noticed that the 31st Legislature passed Act 7731 amending Act 7697, reducing the allocation of funds for YRC from \$3,072,600 for construction to \$72,600 for the design of buildings in March 2015, which was subsequently vetoed by then-Governor Kenneth Mapp in that same month but was overridden by the 31st Legislature in December 2015. "Our research has not found that said funds were ever provided to DHS. We assert that the funding, though meager, be disbursed to DHS for the intended purpose," Ms. Benjamin said. Due to the lack of funding, Ms. Benjamin said the DHS is currently seeking funding sources to construct new buildings at YRC.