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One Year, Six Months Later, Only 4 Homes Completed Under EnVision Tomorrow Program

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It's been roughly a year and six months since commencement of work for the EnVision Tomorrow Program — designed to assist homeowners and landlords whose properties were heavily damaged by the 2017 hurricanes — [was announced](#) during a press conference by Governor Albert Bryan and V.I. Housing Finance Authority Executive Director Daryl Griffith.

Since that time, however, the \$220 million program, whose goal is to complete 1,000 homes by 2025, has only completed four homes, and residents have been registering mounting complaints against V.I.H.F.A., protesting the authority's lack of responses and seemingly unmanned telephone number that is supposed to help Virgin Islanders.

On Tuesday, senators expressed exacerbation with V.I.H.F.A. on the EnVision Tomorrow program during a Committee on Disaster Recovery and Infrastructure hearing.

Mr. Griffith bemoaned the measly figure. "It's not the number [4 houses] we want. We want to repair more homes; we did 1,600 under STEP (Sheltering & Temporary Essential Power Program) and were going to do 700-800 underneath Envision. There is no doubt it is not moving as fast as we want." Previously, when Mr. Griffith was before the Senate in September, [the goal was to complete 1,000 homes.](#)

Mr. Griffith, asked by Senator Franklin Johnson how many homes would be completed between now and June, did not answer the question directly, but said 14 homes were under construction and that V.I.H.F.A. would issue twenty-two bids to contractors this month, with another fifty set to go out in March, and twenty-four in both April and May. Giving a best-case scenario, by June, Griffith said V.I.H.F.A. will have started construction on over 114 homes, but completion depends on severity of damage, he added.

Senate President Donna Frett Gregory brought up the issue of V.I.H.F.A. not responding to applicants. "We received several complaints that folks are not hearing back from your office. There is no one answering the phone and people are not getting back to these property owners. There is a whole level of frustration that is occurring."

Ms. Frett-Gregory also asked Mr. Griffith how he measures accountability and progress with his employees relative to the EnVision Tomorrow Program. Mr. Griffith said he would "phone a friend," referencing the once-popular game show, Who Wants to be a Millionaire, and called on David Martin, V.I.H.F.A.'s chief disaster recovery officer, to provide the information.

Sidestepping the question, Mr. Martin said, "My expectations are that those would get turned around as soon as possible." Ms. Frett-Gregory was not satisfied. "Let's stay on my question," she interjected. The senator was seeking to understand why it has been taking painstakingly long for V.I.H.F.A. to get back to homeowners who had applied for the program. "What's the turnaround time?" Ms. Frett-Gregory pressed. Mr. Martin said the turnaround should be "immediate", a response that goes contrary to the litany of complaints from residents.

"What needs to happen since it's clear that you have not established with your team what the expectations are, you should be saying the turnaround time is X, and Y, and you should be monitoring that. You should be able to tell me we're having challenges because of.... not it's a case-by-case," situation, Ms. Frett-Gregory said.

Moments later, Mr. Griffith was asked when was the last time he appeared before the Senate, to which he responded, "I feel like I live here." Ms. Frett-Gregory fired back: "Yes, you live here but we're still getting the same responses."

Elsewhere, [a letter](#) being sent to applicants from V.I.H.F.A. advising of disapproval of application because of duplicate benefit, appears carelessly put together, does not include an official V.I. Housing Finance Authority letterhead, and does not include a telephone number that applicants could call. The letter advises applicants who have received federal funding as little as \$668.02 for home damage related to the 2017 storms, that they were disqualified from the EnVision Tomorrow program. Property tax delinquency also disqualifies applicants, as well as potential disqualification based on environmental review of a location. If a home is in a flood zone, for example, an applicant would be disqualified.

In total, the Envision Tomorrow program has currently fourteen homes under construction: nine on St. Croix and five in St. Thomas. The four completed homes are all on St. Croix. Out of a pool of 790 homeowners who are in the program, 423 applications are currently pending duplication of benefits review, while 85 have property tax issues.

Senator Alma Francis Heyliger suggested that having individuals who are better suited for leadership jobs in various government arms would yield more fruitful results. "Just listening this afternoon to testimony as it relates to contracts, change orders and a variety of things of that sort, as an individual I sit here and I wonder, maybe if we stop sending in chihuahuas to negotiate with pit bulls, we might do a little bit better," she said.

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