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Concerns About Shelters, Employee Shortage Linger, But First Responder Departments and Agencies Say They Feel Confident Going Into Hurricane Season

Hurricane Season / **Published On May 26, 2021 05:42 PM /**

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Destroyed traffic lights on St. Croix following Hurricane Maria in 2017. By. ERNICE GILBERT/VI CONSORTIUM

With an active hurricane season predicted by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, or NOAA, which is set to begin in a few days on June 1, representatives of VITEMA, the V.I. Department of Humans Service, V.I. Police Department and V.I. National Guard on Tuesday testified on their level of preparedness during a Senate committee hearing.

NOAA reported with 70 percent confidence [last week](#) a likely range of 13 to 20 named storms (winds of 39 mph or higher), of which 6 to 10 could become hurricanes (winds of 74 mph or

higher), including 3 to 5 major hurricanes (category 3, 4 or 5; with winds of 111 mph or higher) is expected.

Senator Samuel Carrion asked Daryl Jaschen, VITEMA director, and Kimberley Causey-Gomez, D.H.S. commissioner, to rate their departments' preparedness on a scale from 1-10.

Mr. Jaschen rated VITEMA a strong 8 and said there's always room for improvement. "The staff is versed, we've gone through several preparation events, we've gone through hurricanes ourselves," he said.

Ms. Causey-Gomez said, "I haven't thought of it as a rating system; I think we are prepared as a collective agency not only within Human Services because we can't do it alone. I'm going to need the National Guard, I'm going to need police, I'm going to need VITEMA, I'm going to need fire in order to do my job."

Mr. Carrion then asked about the specific shortfalls in the D.H.S., to which Ms. Causey-Gomez responded, "I know that we are short staffed, I know our facilities are comprised, I know I have a lot of concern about our two homes for the aged as far as that is concerned. Even though I am working towards a long-term solution, I am concerned about those facilities, the staff, and the residents. For us, making sure we plan and have an effective way of managing that in the event that something happens is, I think, the most important thing for us to do."

Ms. Causey-Gomez eventually said she would rate her department's preparedness a 7 or 7.5 on a scale of 1-10, and agreed that there is always room for improvement. She added that her staff has been through Hurricanes such as Hugo, Wrong Way Lenny, Irma and Maria and she expressed gratitude to have a seasoned team.

Senator Javan James asked Mr. Jaschen for an update on the inventory of essential items. The VITEMA director explained that the agency purchased ten 100 kilowatt generators with CARES Act funds that are currently deployed on St. Thomas and St. Croix, with two additional units heading to St. John soon.

VITEMA's Deputy Director of Logistics, Steve DeBlasio, added that there were two light towers purchased for each island. He then broke down the number of pre-stationed meals and water on each of the following islands: On St. Thomas there were 100,800 meals and 420,936 liters of waters as of Tuesday; on St. Croix there were 107,512 meals and 410,400 liters of water; and on St John there were 15,000 meals and 43,200 liters of water. On all three islands there was availability of tarps and plastic sheeting that can be utilized to cover entire homes, Mr. DeBlasio said.

Mr. Jaschen noted some ways that residents can start to prepare for the hurricane season. "Whether this is your first or 40th hurricane season, a visit to the VITEMA website at www.vitema.vi.gov or FEMA's website at www.ready.gov provides a quick reminder and tips of what is needed to build a plan, prepare a disaster supply kit, and how to stay vigilant to the ever-changing weather conditions of an approaching tropical wave," he said.

Mr. Jaschen encouraged everyone not subscribed to ALERT VI, "to take a few minutes and sign-up by visiting the VITEMA website at www.vitema.vi.gov. Important messages can be sent by VITEMA to landline phones by voice, to mobile phones by voice and text message, and by emails as well," he said. Messages can be communicated in the English or Spanish languages.

In her testimony, Ms. Causey-Gomez identified the following hurricane shelters in the event of a storm:

- Educational Complex High School, St. Croix
- D. C. Canegata Recreation Center, St. Croix
- Bertha C. Boschulte School, St. Thomas
- Lockhart Elementary School, St. Thomas
- Gift Hill School, St. John (currently working on negotiations)
- George Simmons/Adrian Senior Center, St. John
- Firehouse Community Center, Water Island

She also stated, “We are still open to other viable community shelter options. In March 2021, through a press release, the Department of Human Services requested the business and non-profit community to partner with us for shelter operations.”

D.H.S. said it is still conducting inspections on secondary evacuation centers, and Ms. Causey-Gomez expects those locations to be finalized in the next week or two.

She also spoke of the changes to shelters as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, as those facilities' capacities have been diminished. "The differences will be your shelter capacities are decreased, your cleaning and operations increased, and you also have pre-screening," she said, responding to a question from Sen. Alma Francis Heyliger. "This is where I would like to encourage everyone to get vaccinated. That's for your safety as well as everyone else's, especially if you are coming to a shelter.”

Sen. Milton Potter asked what would happen if someone seeking shelter were to come in with a temperature that is deemed too high. Ms. Causey-Gomez said, “I’m going to find a space for you and make sure you are separated from the other parts of the population.”

The D.H.S. commissioner added that the department has been looking into the possibility of doing rapid Covid-19 testing at the shelters. She acknowledged that there was no way to mandate vaccinations for people seeking shelter, however, she encouraged residents to get vaccinated.

Ms. Francis-Heyliger asked Richard Velazquez, Deputy Chief of Police on St. Thomas/Water Island what strategies were in place to prepare officers to support the community in case of a storm. He explained, “We try to get as many officers as we can to their respective zones. We would have them shelter in place for the strength of the storm to pass the territory, the island and then we would immediately go back out to conduct assessment of the roadways, conduct

assessments of our infrastructure and report back.”

Ms. Francis Heyliger followed up an issue from a previous hearing relative to [the lack of bilingual 911 operators](#) at VITEMA. Barbara Petersen, VITEMA assistant director, said the agency has been utilizing a service called Language Line that 911 centers across the U.S. use with access to over 100 languages. She explained that operators are able to punch in a code and have an operator perform translations within seconds.