

Disaster Recovery Moving at Snail's Pace as Four-Year Anniversary of 2017 Storms Approaches; Office of Disaster Recovery Blames FEMA, Senators Urge More Aggressive Action

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Aerial View of the Golden Grove Correctional Facility (John A. Bell Facility), which has faced challenges relative to securing FEMA funding for disaster rebuild. By. ERNICE GILBERT FOR VI CONSORTIUM

With just three months away from the fourth anniversary of the 2017 hurricanes' devastating impacts on the U.S. Virgin Islands, lawmakers in the Committee on Disaster Recovery and Infrastructure summoned the Office of Disaster Recovery and the Bureau of Corrections for yet another update on the status of recovery projects.

Senators have been immensely frustrated with the slow pace of recovery, and Committee Chairwoman Senator Janelle Sarauw sought to relay to testifiers why. "Both directors, I think it's important to understand the frustration overall on the slowness of the recovery," she said referring to Office of Disaster Recovery Director Adrienne Williams- Octalien, and Bureau of Corrections Director Wynn Testamark. "You know we are in 2021 and the hurricanes hit in 2017. Four years later, we still have not started. Not started scope of work development, not started design... That remains the argument."

She spoke of Witt O'Brien's \$80 million contract with the local government to help move recovery projects forward, and yet the territory remains unfulfilled in many ways: roof work, mold remediation, schools, roads, hospitals, the Bureau of Corrections — "It is really a sad situation the length of time it takes to move something," she said.

It was mentioned in the hearing that Witt O'Brien did help the B.O.C. receive 500 percent more than the initial funds offered to rebuild the [Swan Correctional Annex back in October](#).

Senate President Donna Frett-Gregory said Wednesday's hearing was déjà vu. "We continue to air our frustrations in regards to the slow recovery process, and the slow situation with us actually getting our projects obligated." She asked about B.O.C., which has been obligated funds but work had yet to start.

There seemed to be a sense of confidence shared by the Bryan administration that President Joe Biden would be beneficial to the territory after FEMA Director Deanne Criswell [pledged her support](#) to help the territory.

"The new administrator was here a week ago and met with the governor and has pledged her support to be able to move a lot of these issues forward," said Mrs. Williams- Octalien.

The O.D.R. director then explained what she said was one of the main problems the local government and FEMA has faced. "FEMA actually believes that a lot of our damages are not disaster damage and they are prepared to obligate funds that they believe are disaster damage."

Mrs. Williams-Octalien further stated that Governor Bryan has expressed his dissatisfaction with the slow progress. "If you feel the frustration, you can imagine how we are feeling on this side on a day-to-day pushing and pushing and not feel like we are going anywhere."

Ms. Frett-Gregory responded, "Thank you for your responses but I really believe that we are at the point where we have to collectively beat the pavement on this one."

"I think we need to emerge ourselves in the nation's capital at this point," she suggested.

Ms. Sarauw then made note of local and national publications reporting that Mr. Biden [had chastised the U.S. Department of Justice](#) for its position on the treatment of U.S. territories, indicating that the USVI deserves equal treatment under federal programs. "So we definitely have to state our case and bend the ear of the president at this point," she said.

Some of the specific issues that were discussed in relation to the Bureau of Corrections were the roof of Golden Grove Correctional Facility (John A. Bell Facility) still being damaged along with mold at the facility — even as conversations were still ongoing with FEMA relative to what qualifies for hurricane damage.

Senator Marvin Blyden asked what was being done in the interim as the territory waits on FEMA. Mrs. Williams-Octalien responded, "In the interim we are working to get the solicitation out so we can get the roof repaired."

Ms. Testamark said that though there was interior damage at the facility, the roof repairs must first be addressed. "The Bureau has been making temporary repairs to the roof to keep the facility operating while continuing its discussions with FEMA over the scope of other repairs," she said.

Mrs. Williams-Octalien later said that the Golden Grove project would be going out to bid later this week with a more clarified scope of work than the previous two attempts.

Noting from testimony that six rooms at the Golden Grove facility were affected by mold, Senator Samuel Carrion asked whether those rooms were being used. Ms. Testamark said they were, but daily sanitization with bleach and water remedied the situation in the interim.

Relative to the disagreements with FEMA on why the Golden Grove facility suffered hurricane damage, Ms. Williams-Octalien said O.D.R. has presented a lot of documentation to prove its case, however FEMA has to make its own decision.

Mr. Carrion asked what would be the plan if FEMA rejected the proposal a third time. Ms. Williams-Octalien said, "I know at the minimum we are going to get started on moving the project through with the damages that have been approved, because we do need to bring some relief to the facility."