

# A Million Dollars for Vaccine Lottery While Seniors Continue to Live in 'Stables': DHS Gets Earful at Hearing

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**Queen Louise Home for the Aged in St. Thomas. Senators on Wednesday, June 9, 2021 chided testifiers for having seniors housed in facilities they contend are not fit for living.**

Dept. of Human Services Commissioner Kimberley Causey-Gomez during testimony at a Senate hearing Wednesday provided a detailed timeline for new senior homes in the territory using disaster recovery funds, with both senior facilities — the new Herbert Grigg and Queen Louise homes for the aged — projected to be completed in the third quarter of 2024.

The homes are being designed to initially house 60 seniors, and senators questioned whether the capacity was adequate. But lawmakers moved beyond the future facilities to talk about the current

situation, describing them as a "pig farm" and "stables" in an effort to convey the dire situation seniors are facing at the nursing homes.

“Our facilities are over 50 years old, that is enough to tell me that we need to start looking at replacing these facilities,” said Senator Kenneth Gittens during the Committee on Disaster Recovery and Infrastructure hearing.

He added, "The Queen Louise facility for the aged on St. Thomas, I could not believe what that place looked like. It reminded me of a pig farm that I visited at some point. There is no way I would want to see my parents or grandparents in that place. It is time for that place to be totally shut down. No one should be in there.”

Senator Janelle Sarauw, chairwoman of the committee, said in reference to the Queen Louise Home, “From the hurricanes we made a request for federal funding from FEMA to find finances for the replacement of the facility.” She asked whether FEMA had provided a response and whether D.H.S. had found a site. Ms. Causey Gomez said D.H.S. located a property and has "requested Property and Procurement to do the negotiations for the land of the property.” She refused to name the location “until we get it finalized.”

Ms. Sarauw then asked whether CARES Act funding could be used for relocation because, she said, it is a Covid matter. “Getting seniors to a more Covid-safe environment — can that not be a case to use CARES Act funding for relocation of seniors? Have we tried to present that argument and were told no?”

Ms. Casuey-Gomez said D.H.S. had utilized Covid funding to temporarily house seniors who had contracted the virus. Ms. Sarauw then asked, “Did we make an attempt to present a case to the federal government stating that the configuration of the current facility is not a Covid-safe environment?” The senator then mentioned that the Dept. of Education has received over \$400 million to make schools Covid-safe. “Have we argued a case to our federal government to move our seniors to a more amenable site that is Covid-19 safe? Because we have seniors in a place that's like they are in stables if we are going to be real.”

Ms. Causey-Gomez said “no.”

A few minutes later, Ms. Sarauw made the case that if four seniors died in the Queen Louise Home because of Covid, “that was a strong enough case to make to the federal government.”

She added, “We have a whole lottery going on for vaccine, a whole lottery, we could provide that case... If we could use CARES Act funding for a lottery, we could find a good argument to take our seniors out of the Queen Louise Home. I stand firmly by that indignation. You could take that million dollars and retrofit someplace because we stick people in hotels all over the place. We find money for what we want to find money for.”

Mr. Gittens agreed, “You took the words right out of my mouth with this lottery. When we could find a million dollars to encourage people to take the vaccination, I tell you all we don't have a money problem in this territory, we have a money management problem.”

The projected timeline for the new Herbert Grigg Skilled Nursing Facility:

- Project CDBG-DR Sub-recipient Agreement between DHS and VIHFA executed by 6/30/21.
- Solicitation, selection & contract executed for design firm by 9/30/21.

- Initial design, engineering & environmental review completed by 6/30/2022.
- Solicitation, selection & contract execution for general contractor by 9/30/2022.
- Construction completed by third quarter 2024.
- Estimated Cost- \$61,187,756

The projected timeline for the Queen Louise Skilled Nursing Facility:

- Project Sub-recipient Agreement between DHS and VIHFA executed by 9/30/2021.
- Solicitation, selection & contract executed for design firm by 12/30/2021.
- Initial design, engineering & environmental review completed by 4th 97 quarter 2022.
- Solicitation, selection & contract execution for general contractor by end of 1st quarter 2023.
- Construction completed by 4th quarter 2024.
- Estimated Cost - \$48,809,642

On the capacity issue for the new facilities, Senator Franklin Johnson stated, “There has always been a waiting list at the Herbert Grigg Home and I’m quite sure at Queen Louise... Don’t you think we need to go beyond 60?”

Ms. Causey-Gomez responded, “That’s a great question. I was arguing for an 80-100 bed facility. That was my initial argument. I said if you build it they will come. I think 60 is fair because we can always expand later. I think 60 is a good start.”

The commissioner explained that if the facility starts at 60, “our quality of care is there to ensure we are able to get the staffing required,” as well as “making sure the guidelines for the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services are secured too.”

Even so, she agreed with the senator’s concern and said, “I know for a fact we will fill it very quickly.”