

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Pressure To Get Emergency Rental Assistance Money To Landlords Mounts as Payouts For Rental Assistance Program Set To Begin Next Week

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Senators expressed disappointment and frustration during a Committee on Housing, Transportation and Telecommunications hearing on Thursday that the Virgin Islands Housing Finance Authority has yet to make a single payment from the Emergency Rental Assistance Program, a fact the V.I.H.F.A. officials say will change next week as they are hiring temporary employees to assist with processing applications. The program began accepting applications on March 29 this year.

When Senator Samuel Carrion asked Janine Hector, Director of Federal Programs for V.I.H.F.A, about the timeline from when an application is received to when a landlord is paid out she responded “at this point it's really hard to say what is the timeline because as you know we have been accepting applications for some time and up to this point, as per Director Griffith’s testimony, we have not made any payouts yet... it is our intention to start making payouts starting next week.”

Mr. Carrion was disappointed “to hear that to this date no money has been awarded to any of these individuals” and later on in the discussion said “clearly not having awarded anything to this date is really unacceptable and I hope this changes because we have our people that are suffering and expecting to receive this money.”

One of the reasons that Ms. Hector said there is no solid timeline because the V.I.H.F.A will be hiring temporary employees and “once that happens then we will be able to advance the process. At that point that will inform better what will be the timeline.”

Senator Kurt Violet asked Ms. Hector “by this Monday you are going to have additional staff hired?”, a fact that she mentioned earlier, to which she responded “offer letters are going out today based on the selections that we made and we will be onboarding some folks starting as early as Monday next week.”

Ms. Hector hopes to hire 20-22 employees in total and thinks “that we should have 6-7 individuals by Monday.”

Her breakdown for her ideal staff was 8 eligibility reviewers per district, a team manager in each district, a district chief for each district and 2 accounting employees.

Mr. Blyden asked if the issue of where to place the temporary staff members had been addressed and Ms. Hector said “We have space waiting.”

Mr. Violet wanted to know if there was anyone to speed up the projections of applications that were presented in Daryl Griffith’s, V.I.H.F.A. executive director, opening testimony. Those projections were “that approximately 30 files should be paid out by the end of July – we are aiming for the first 6 by next week. Beginning in August, our goal will then be to clear 10-15 files per week going forward.”

Mr. Vialet said “You presently have 400 applications, at that rate it will take 30-40 weeks in order to process this 400 applications, which is more than six months.”

Ms. Hector clarified that projections were “for the month of August only because as we onboard the temporary staff and ramp up then obviously we expect to clear more applications... the number will obviously increase as we increase staff.”

Mr. Griffith later added “It is not the projection for the life of the program... the number of applications we review will not be a static number, that number will increase dramatically when the number of employees increases.”

When asked about the current applications by Mr. Vialet, Ms. Hector said “by the end of September, at the latest, that we would have cleared those out with the expectations of any that may have some particularly challenging issue.”

A key reason for the concern of senators is that the moratorium on evictions is set to expire at the end of this month. Mr. Blyden asked the V.I.H.F.A. “are you aware that the C.D.C. moratorium runs out at the end of the month for evictions?”

Mr. Griffith responded yes and Ms. Hector explained that the local moratorium by executive order of Governor Albert Bryan “also expires on July 31st. We are very aware of that, keenly aware of it.”

Ms. Hector explained that the V.I.H.F.A. has been in communication with landlords while they are processing applications. She said “we have been providing letters reassuring landlords that their tenant is an applicant, that the applications are in process... many landlords have been responding favorably indicating that with that assurance that they will continue to be patient.”

Ms. Hector explained later in the hearing of the process they had to deal with when a landlord wasn't patient and evicted their tenant, an example that speaks to the senators' uneasiness, during a “lapse between executive orders.” The applicant was “provided with emergency assistance immediately and then she was rehoused in three days.”

Mr. Vialet wanted to know if workers that were recently laid off by the Limetree would be eligible for the program. Ms. Hector's response to the inquiry was “is their situation is

Covid related because if it is not Covid related they wouldn't be eligible period regardless of their income."

Mr. Blyden made the case that the situation described should be written off as a no so quickly. "Many folks at Limetree have lost their job but at the same time there are other people in the household that have been affected by Covid maybe some of this individuals did not come forward because the income was there but as result of the closure they do qualify because in ERAP-2 it speaks to extenuating circumstances... we can't just say no we have to inquire."

Mr. Griffith said that \$21 million of the \$39 million has been received by the V.I.H.F.A and that 10 percent of the 39 million is allowed to be for administrative costs. "That's not just staffing that includes all the marketing that we do."