

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Under Pressure, DHS Hastens Streamlining of Payment Process For Child Care Providers

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Tenacious Toddlers is owed thousands of dollars by the Dept. of Human Services for child care services. D.H.S. said it has streamlined a process to eliminate bottlenecks that caused months-long backlogs. By. ERNICE GILBERT FOR VI CONSORTIUM.

Thousands of children are dropped off daily to childcare providers across the territory. The parents of these children rely on the Dept. of Human Services to use federal dollars it receives specifically to pay the child care centers, as they would not be able to afford the cost otherwise.

But D.H.S. up until recently was woefully behind in making payments to the child care providers, forcing those providers to reject some of the most vulnerable children while welcoming those whose parents have the ability to pay — all in an effort to stay in business.

Multiple child care centers reached out to the Consortium early July to voice their concerns. Their complaint was selfsame: D.H.S. owed tens of thousands of dollars dating back to 2020; the department broke several promises to make good on the covenant; and it constantly changed an agreement while forcing child care providers to adapt.

Meanwhile, childcare providers across the territory were suffering, struggling to get by as months past without payment.

Patricia Evans is the owner of Tenacious Toddlers, one of the better known child care facilities on St. Croix. Ms. Evans said some years ago, a private entity had been contracted to pay the centers and during that period payments were remitted in a timely fashion.

"Ever since the government took it over to cut our checks, we have been delayed. We used to get our checks between the 15th and 20th of every month, but since the government took over, we wait months and months — almost a year to get paid," she told the Consortium earlier this month.

The Clifton Hill Group Daycare Home had a similar story. "They haven't even paid us from since last year, and they still owe, and they expect us to still function and carry on," CHGD told this publication on July 8. "We submit every document every time. Sometimes two, three times we submit the same documents. We have to constantly be sending in these documents. So what are you doing with the documents that we're sending in? They're making it seems like we're the ones holding up the payments, but we're not."

D.H.S. quickly worked through the issues upon being contacted by the Consortium. The department held multiple meetings with the Dept. of Property and Procurement and the Dept. of Finance — both party to the payments process. D.H.S. said at the time it would try to issue all outstanding payments in two weeks.

The two weeks past and the department made some payments, telling the Consortium that it was in the process of fully coming up to date while implementing a strategy moving forward to mitigate such delays.

"Thank you for your patience and seeking detailed information to resolve a complex and pressing issue regarding Child Care payments," D.H.S. said. "The Office of Child Care and Regulatory Services is aware of the payment challenges experienced by some child care providers. We are making every effort to remedy those situations. Vast improvements have been made to the subsidy payment process: from receipt of payment documents, to authorizations for payments, to disbursement of payments which is a process that spans three departments."

Ms. Evans, the owner of Tenacious Toddlers, said she was still owed funds, though she said child care providers she contacted said they were starting to receive payments — some two of ten invoices, others one of five. D.H.S. said the changes to the process would mean more consistent payments. "These changes are making payments more

timely and consistent for providers. Child Care providers can themselves attest to the recent improvements. There are payments being processed to bring all payments current and we are confident that these improvements can keep provider payments processing with seamless effectiveness," the department said in a statement provided to the Consortium last week.

The sprawling government arm encouraged licensed child care providers across the territory to [apply for CARES Act Mini Grants](#) of up to \$30K that are now available.

During its budget hearing Monday, D.H.S. said it had seen little appetite for the grants, stating that of the 172 licensed child care providers in the territory, only ten had applied.