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V.I. Dept. of Human Services Secures \$42.4 Million to Build State-of-the-Art Head Start Facility on St. Croix and New Facilities in St. Thomas-St. John District

Government / **Published On September 03, 2021 03:26 AM /**

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The site of the former Charles H. Emmanuel Elementary school where the D.H.S. state-of-the-art facility will be built. By. DHS

The V.I. Department of Human Services on Thursday announced that it has received official notification that its Head Start Program has been awarded an unprecedented \$42,453,995 for new Head Start facilities territory-wide, including a state-of-the-art Head Start slated to be built on the site of the old Charles H. Emmanuel Elementary School, which is located immediately across the street from the Aureo Diaz Heights housing community.

Critically, the funds require no local match, meaning the project won't be bottlenecked by the need for the local government to come up with 10 percent of the funds.

D.H.S. said its Head Start Program applied for the grants in September 2020 and has been working with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families Office of Head Start. The end goal was to fulfill all requirements for approval to give the Virgin Islands what D.H.S. deemed an "extraordinary and unparalleled" opportunity to rebuild the territory's Head Start infrastructure with 100 percent federal funding. The local D.H.S. team is also awaiting decisions on two more grants that would increase the current construction total.

The award notably includes funds to:

- Construct a state-of-the-art Head Start mega multi-classroom center at the currently shuttered Charles H. Emmanuel Elementary School site
- Demolish and rebuild the Concordia Head Start
- Construct a Head Start center at the long, unutilized DHS Bolongo property
- Construct a mega center at the Tabor and Harmony site

The award will also include other significant upgrades territory-wide, D.H.S. said, though they were not mentioned.

"These grants were complicated and detailed in nature, but the Head Start team fought to secure the resources that will tremendously benefit the territory's youngest learners for generations to come," D.H.S. said in its release.

D.H.S. Commissioner Kimberley Causey-Gomez said, "I am very proud of the Head Start Team that worked tirelessly to achieve the dream of building state of the art learning environments for our children. These federal awards will support our children's health and wellbeing in the Virgin Islands and will be supported by this Administration's ongoing rebuilding efforts to make the Virgin Islands whole again.

"Our DHS Head Start program provides family-centered services for low-income families with very young children. It is designed to promote the comprehensive development of three to five-year-olds, and to enable their parents to fulfill their roles of moving towards self-sufficiency. Head Start emphasizes the role of parents as their child's first and most important teacher. While we will have our work cut out for us, Assistant Commissioner Carla Benjamin, Head Start Administrator Masika Lewis, Head Start Assistant Administrator Michael Richards and their team are up to the challenge and will have the full support of the DHS leadership and the Office of the Governor."

D.H.S. Assistant Commissioner Carla Benjamin, who made known that construction is expected to commence in 18 months, said the Head Start facility to be built at the Charles Emmanuel site will be a 15-classroom facility. "Each Head Start, when not in the Covid environment, accommodates 20 children, so that would be 300 students," she said.

The state-of-the-art Head Start would be up to date with all federal recommendations, and it is expected to be a hardened site doubling as a shelter during hurricane season, Ms. Benjamin said. The assistant commissioner spoke about the benefits of the would-be facility to the surrounding communities, including Aureo Diaz Heights, Candido Guadalupe, Mon Bijou, Castle Burke, Profit Hills housing community among others.

D.H.S. said it successfully applied for and received a new 5-year grant to continue to operate the mostly federal funded Head Start program in the territory. The program also recently received \$1,297,449 in American Rescue Plan Act funding.

In a statement, Governor Albert Bryan told the Consortium, "This is just one more step to ensure the education and hence the financial future of our young people. Coupled with additional staff, resources and community support we will build not only buildings but a real pathway out of poverty. Much thanks to Commissioner Causey-Gomez and to all the staff that made this possible."

Head Start is a nationally recognized, best in class program that has been providing comprehensive early childhood education, health, nutrition, and parent involvement services to low-income children ages three to five and families since 1966, said D.H.S. Head Start's program design, services and resources have been uniquely designed to foster stable family relationships, enhance children's physical and emotional well-being, and establish an environment to develop strong cognitive skills.

"Transitioning from preschool to elementary school imposes diverse developmental challenges that include requiring the children to engage successfully with their peers outside the family network, adjust to the space of a classroom, and meet the expectations the school setting provides," explained Ms. Benjamin, who is also a licensed certified social worker. "The proposed new facilities, that we will now have the funding to construct, will be designed to address and facilitate these necessary developmental milestones. My team's passion, hard work and dedication is being rewarded in this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to design and build creative, safe and top-rated spaces to nurture and give the best start to our kids here in the territory."

D.H.S. said the grant applications included the conceptual design phase for the new builds and upgrades. With the approval of the grants, the D.H.S. Head Start team is now moving into the architectural and engineering phase. Additional details will be released as the team continues to work closely with the Department of Property and Procurement and the Department of Public works, according to the release.

D.H.S. Head Start Registration

- The DHS-Head Start Program registration process is on-going throughout the year.
- Children must be three years old by December 31st. Parents must bring the child's birth certificate and proof of income that shows the family meets the federal guideline for income eligibility.
- Adults who are guardians must provide evidence of guardianship such as a court order.
- Parents of children with disabilities are especially encouraged to apply for enrollment.

Contact Information and Registration Portal

- Feel free to create an account, if you have not already, and apply through Head Start's online portal (COPA) at <https://vihs.mycopa.com/familyPortal/childCare.epl>
- Questions for the Head Start office can be addressed at (340)773-1972 on St. Croix or (340)774-0930 ext. 4200 on St. Thomas.
- Families may also email Masikia.lewis@dhs.vi.gov and Michael.richards@dhs.vi.gov.

