

The Virgin Islands Consortium

FEMA Awards USVI \$233 Million to Pay STEP Program Contractors

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Home on St. Croix damaged by Hurricane Maria By. Irene Ali Photography

ST. CROIX — The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has awarded the U.S. Virgin Islands \$232,919,518 in federal funding to cover costs of the Virgin Islands Housing Finance Authority's Sheltering and Temporary Essential Power Pilot Program (STEP), Government House has announced.

The STEP Program provided FEMA funding for temporary repairs on homes damaged by Hurricanes Irma and Maria. The program, which Government House said ended in April, has been replaced by the [EnVision Tomorrow Housing Recovery Repair Program](#) for

homes and rental units. The new program provides federal funding to qualified residents for permanent repairs.

Governor Albert Bryan on Monday said his administration had been working for the funds' release since taking office in January, and he expressed gratitude to FEMA and Acting Administrator Pete Gaynor for FEMA's continued support in the territory's recovery.

"Keeping the recovery on track is one of our key priorities, and we have worked tirelessly since taking office this year to clean up the past discrepancies in this program," Mr. said. "Today, I am proud to announce that we can now move forward with providing the much-needed payments to the STEP contractors, who have been more than patient throughout this process."

He added, "I want to thank FEMA, and Acting Administrator Gaynor, as well as Office of Disaster Recovery Director Adrienne Williams-Octalien and Virgin Islands House Finance Authority Executive Director Daryl Griffith for all of their efforts."

Mr. Bryan also said that while the obligation of the funding is a significant milestone, there are still a few details to work out with FEMA before making contractor payments.

The funds will be used to pay contractors who performed work during the STEP program but have yet to be paid. [Earlier this month](#), U.S. Senator John Kennedy (R-La.) and U.S. Senator Bill Cassidy, M.D. (R- La.) announced a decision by FEMA to expedite the funding process for the U.S. Virgin Islands to pay Louisiana contractors who provided immediate aid following the 2017 storms.

"Louisiana businesses have waited long enough and are dying on the vine as a result of all of this," said Mr. Kennedy. "Now it's up to Gov. Bryan to ensure that this funding is directed towards Louisiana contractors who badly need these funds to pay their workers before Christmas and keep their doors open. We've left these contractors in the lurch for far too long, and enough is enough. I'm optimistic that Gov. Bryan is aware of our dire situation and will remove any remaining obstacles in the coming days."

"Louisiana contractors rushed to help the U.S. Virgin Islands recover in the aftermath of Irma and Maria. Two years later, they have not been paid," said Mr. Cassidy. "This funding is intended for Louisiana contractors. Gov. Bryan making these payments is vital for these firms to remain open and able to aid in future disasters."

Contractors [had threatened](#) to place liens on homes of residents whose properties they had repaired. TJ Sutton, a construction company hired by Citadel Recovery Services, LLC, a AECOM contractor, said in statement in November that it had 120 days under Virgin Islands law to serve summons and complaints to St. Thomas homeowners whose homes the liens were placed on. The company on August 19 filed complaints to foreclose on all liens, and had a 90-day window to file the suit to foreclose. With the FEMA funding now released, the liens will most likely be abounded by Sutton, which had stressed that it had no desire to follow through with the liens.

In October, Mr. Bryan and his senior staff met with FEMA Acting Administrator Peter Gaynor in Washington, D.C., and invited him to the territory to continue the discussion and to see firsthand the status of the recovery, according to Government House.

Earlier this month, Mr. Gaynor visited St. Croix and toured Luis Hospital, and the governor expressed his gratitude for the assistance of the territory's federal partners in the recovery process, but also shared his frustration with the lack of progress on the essential work of restoring the U.S. Virgin Islands' hospitals and schools and fixing the roads.

During the St. Croix visit, Mr. Gaynor said he would work with the territory to push the projects forward and expedite progress on them, according to Government House.