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141 Virgin Islanders Have Withdrawn Their Application From the Emergency Rental Assistance Program

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Seattle, USA – March 27, 2020: Late in the day a sticker in Westlake downtown Seattle calling for a rent strike. By. GETTY IMAGES

Lawmakers have learned that 141 people who applied to received assistance through the Emergency Rental Assistance Program that was created as a response to the financial strain being placed on families due to the Covid-19 pandemic, have withdrawn their applications.

This was disclosed during a meeting of the Committee on Disaster Recovery and Infrastructure Friday, where lawmakers received testimony from the V.I. Housing Finance Authority regarding the status of all disaster-related projects in the territory, their respective contracts, inclusive of professional services and task order contracts, both anticipated and underway.

Some people, lawmakers were told did not want to go through the full application process because they had to give documentation proving that they were eligible. “You have to get documentation saying that you were not working because of Covid-19. Some people, government workers will apply and then they will know they are not eligible after speaking to us, they will withdraw,” explained a representative from VIHFA.

Administered by VIHFA, the Emergency Rental Assistance Program, or ERAP, received \$21.3 million in funds with an expiration date of September 30, 2022, then another award of \$18.3 million with an expiration date of December 20, 2026.

Currently, the VIHFA utilizes a group of nonprofit, social service organizations to assist with administering the application/intake process. These include the St. John Community Foundation, Family Resource Center, Catholic Charities of the VI, Methodist Training and Outreach Center, Salvation Army, and St. Croix Mission Outreach.

As of the end of February 2022, the VIHFA disbursed \$1.7 million in ERAP assistance to families in the territory for rent and utilities.

The breakdown of applications is as follows:

- 244 applications have been approved (160 for STT-STJ, 84 for STX)
- 42 applications denied/ineligible
- 141 applications withdrawn
- 74 applications in final review pending payment
- 280 applications in process

Dayna Clendinen, acting director of VIHFA said that the distribution of applications highlights the difference between the two districts, with the St. Thomas-St. John district having more households applying for assistance than St. Croix.

“Thomas-St. John also has a higher percentage of renters, persons employed in the hospitality and service industry, and the cost of rental units is higher. These issues have been compounded by rapidly rising rent since the hurricanes and are now being coupled with the impact that Covid-19 has had on employment,” she told the committee.

It was also pointed out that in addition, the high cost of electricity is another factor that contributes to an applicant’s inability to remain current on bills. “While ERAP does provide utility assistance, only households who have been impacted by Covid-19 due to loss of income are eligible. The VIHFA understands the anguish of families who need this assistance and is committed to processing all applications. We appreciate the patience and forbearance of landlords as they also have financial obligations that must be met,” she said.