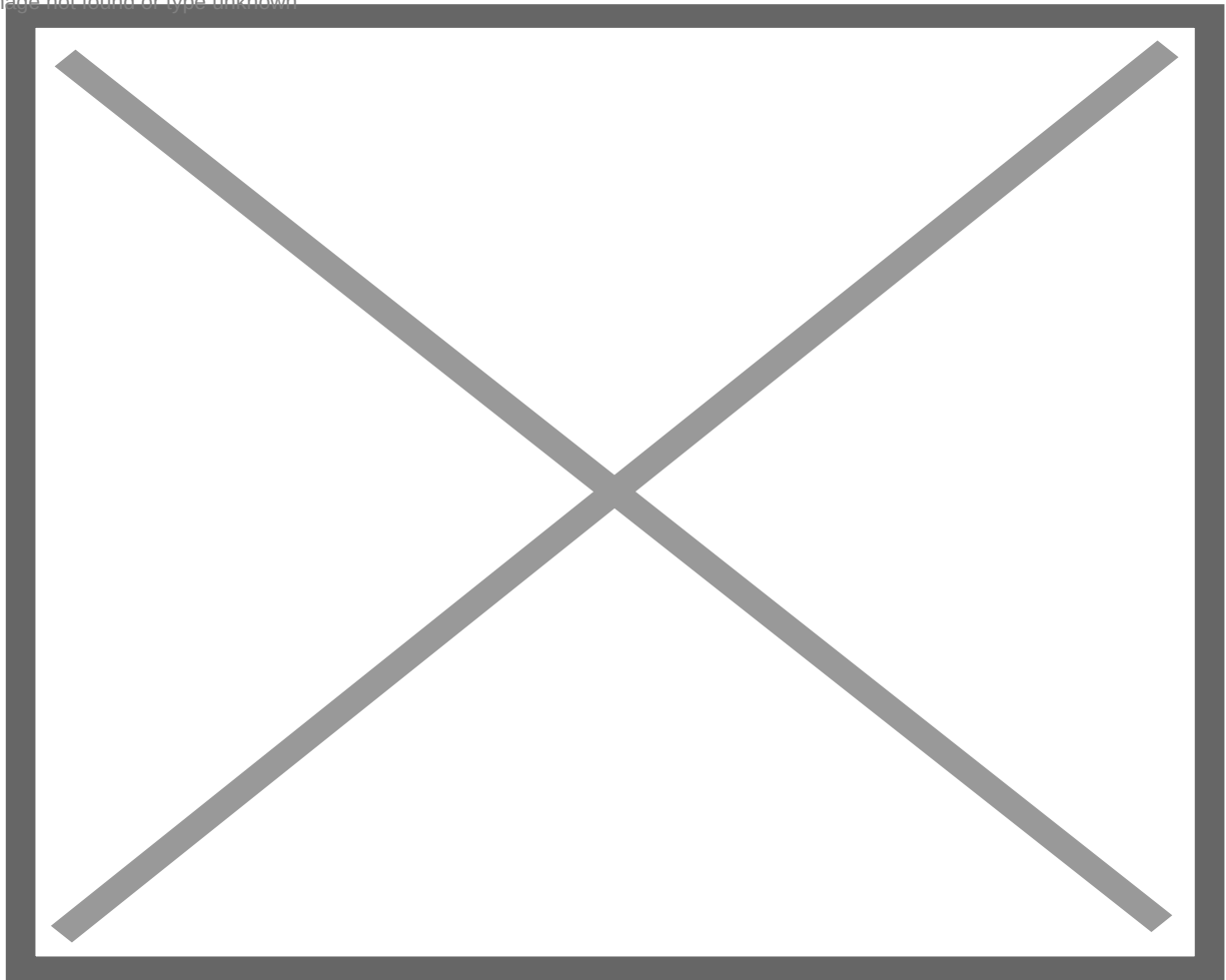


As Rent Prices Skyrocket in USVI, Housing Officials and Senators Call For Rent Control Legislation to Tame 'Crisis'

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Akala Anthony, director of the V.I. Housing Authority's Housing Choice Voucher Program has suggested that legislative measures be put in place to help control the cost of rent in the territory. Speaking during a Senate hearing Monday, she said the continuous increases in rent is causing a significant number of families to be unable to get affordable housing.

“We need to take a look at what we will consider to be a rent statute. Yes, the rent has gone up but we need to take a look at why and how we could address that issue in the territory because as much as we will try to increase the rent on our program, we are still going to have the issues of families not being able to find units because it’s just continuing to increase in the territory,” she said during a meeting of the Committee on Housing, Transportation and Telecommunications.

The discussion was on the status of housing, housing opportunities, home ownership opportunities and plans for the future of housing in the Virgin Islands. The testifiers were from the V.I. Housing Authority and the V.I. Housing Finance Authority.

"We need to stabilize our rent and figure out how or why we can do that, and I will suggest we sit at the table and have that discussion," Mrs. Anthony said. She added that the increase in rent "is affecting our program in a tremendous way," as she informed the committee that the budget her department receives isn't sufficient to help families.

Committee Chairman Senator Marvin Blyden referred to federal studies that show some rent prices in the USVI have doubled since 2017 following Hurricanes Irma and Maria. He also said that homeownership in the U.S. Virgin Islands, which is already lower than the U.S. mainland, continues to decline. "Since 2010 the rate of homeownership in the Virgin Islands has fallen from nearly 50 percent to just 42.8 percent," Mr. Blyden stated. "What makes this low rate of homeownership so painful and unacceptable is that the statistics tell us that many Virgin Islanders are paying more each month in rent than they would pay to mortgage a similarly sized and located home." Mr. Blyden said the current situation was no less than a crisis that needs to be addressed.

The Housing Choice Voucher Program has a budget of approximately \$15 million that supports about 2,047 families, V.I.H.A. said. Currently, there are around 1,490 families receiving housing assistance for a 73 percent utilization rate. However, by the end of the fiscal year, the Housing Authority said it will have utilized approximately 99 percent of the available budget.

"We are going to use our entire budget but we are not going to meet the maximum number of families that need the help," she said.

Senator Novelle Francis, who was questioning Mrs. Anthony informed her and the committee that there is a rent control bill going through the legislative process. "We are seeing where individuals are being forced into homelessness as a result of this ever-increasing cost of these rentals," he said.

Mrs. Anthony disclosed that one of the greatest challenges for her department is families being unable to find suitable housing. She also informed lawmakers about a recent adjustment made to extend the life of vouchers.

"What we did to adjust to that issue is to allow families to hold vouchers for up to one year. Typically families were only able to hold vouchers for four months, but we have adjusted that for one year in order to help families with a better chance of finding affordable housing in our community."

During her testimony, committee members learned that families can find rental units of up to 130 percent of the allowable fair market rent from the U.S. Dept. of Housing and Urban Development, and with regards to the governor's mandate as it pertains to a rent increase moratorium put in place as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, that has become one of the toughest battles for the Housing Authority.

There were 4,000 families from a combination of tenant-based and project-based (Section 8) lists waiting for assistance as of January 31, the Housing Authority said.

V.I.H.A. also spoke of "significant financial impact" affecting participants of the Housing Choice Voucher Program. "As a result, we have 400 households out of approximately 1,500 who have requested rent changes due to loss of income. We are working with our families to reduce the burden and help them through this economic crisis to address this issue," said V.I.H.A. Executive

Director Robert Graham.

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