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Plaskett Presents \$42.4 Million Check to Human Services For Construction of Head Start Facilities Territory-Wide

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Ernice Gilbert **August 03, 2022**

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From left to right: Asst. Commissioner Carla Benjamin, Commisioner Kimberley Causey-Gomez, Congresswoman Plaskett, ODR Dir. Adrienne Williams-Octalien, and Head Start Admin. Masikia Lewis. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett on Tuesday presented a \$42.4 million check to the V.I. Dept. of Human Services for construction of Head Start facilities in both districts.

According to Ms. Plaskett, who serves on the House Ways and Means, Budget and Agriculture Committees, the funding is for construction grants and will require zero local match to fund the construction and restoration of facilities territory-wide.

"I would like to extend a special thank you to DHS Commissioner Gomez, Assistant Commissioner [Carla] Benjamin and Head Start Administrator Masikia Lewis for the excellent work they do to support the children in our territory. We must remain unwavering in our commitment and in our advocacy and support for our next generations," Ms. Plaskett shared during the check presentation event Tuesday.

D.H.S. Commissioner Kimberley Causey-Gomez said the territory "embraces this opportunity to effectively leverage the Federal dollars that will impact the early childhood education environment for the children of the Virgin Islands for generations to come."

She also said that Head Start provides a safe environment not only for just learning in the classroom, "but head start wraps around the entire family. We provide health and wellness, educational services, social services, trainings and mental health aspects."

"We are actively recruiting children for Head Start school year 2022-2023," she said.

Ms. Benjamin said the grant funds will ensure that D.H.S. is able to renovate, upgrade and build new facilities so that the territory's children are able to learn in a rich environment.

Relative to enrollment, she said, "Our funded enrollment is 794. We are about 80 percent full and are pretty much full on the STT/STJ end. St. Croix we are still recruiting vigorously. We have 500 slots on St. Croix because the need has always been greater here and 294 slots left on the St. Thomas/St. John district."

DHS Head Start Administrator, Masikia Lewis also shared that the landmark amount of funding that the territory's Head Start program has been awarded will help construct state of the art, mega, multi-purpose head start centers around our territory.

Office of Disaster Recovery Director, Adrienne Williams-Octalien, stated, "We here at the Office of Disaster Recovery take deep pride in rebuilding the Virgin Islands. We call it a legacy of resilience."

The Head Start program was launched in 1965 by President Lyndon B. Johnson as an eight-week demonstration project designed to help break the cycle of poverty. The program promotes the school readiness of infants, toddlers, and preschool-aged children in a variety of settings including centers, family childcare, and children's homes. Furthermore, this vital program engages parents or other key family members in positive relationships, with a focus on family well-being, and creates opportunities for participation in leadership roles, including feedback on program operations.