

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Homelessness Problem in USVI Exacerbated by Lack of Housing, Fragmented Support Systems, Officials Say

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In 2020, this then-homeless man lived out of a shopping cart behind Sunny Isle on St. Croix for months. He is no longer in that location, and could we not verify whether his current housing status. By. REEMY-REEMZ PHOTOGRAPHY/VICONSORTIUM

The lack of adequate affordable housing is contributing to elevated levels of homelessness in the territory, keeping people in emergency shelters well over the allotted timeframe.

“If you can’t find a permanent supportive housing location for someone who’s in transitional housing to move into, now you don’t have that transitional housing spot opening up for someone who’s in the emergency shelter,” said Richard Bourne-Vanneck, chair of the Catholic Charities of the Virgin Islands. Mr. Bourne-Vanneck was speaking to members of the Senate Committee on Housing, Transportation and Telecommunications during a hearing on Monday.

With limited emergency housing available, the situation further displaces people in need of shelter, he said.

Department of Human Services Commissioner Kimberley-Causey Gomez agreed, noting that nonprofit agencies are reporting an increase in homelessness. The agencies, who receive funding to support placement, say that housing resources previously available have dwindled in the face of the growing short-term rental market, and because hotel rooms have become scarcer as tourism booms.

“Other challenges expressed by nonprofits include fiscal delays due to bureaucratic processes. Landlords are reluctant to participate in housing programs to assist [the] homeless because it takes so long for a potential tenant to be placed, delaying receipt of rental revenue streams,” the DHS commissioner added.

Ms. Causey-Gomez explained that homelessness can occur if someone moves to the Virgin Islands to work, has difficulty finding employment and is financially unable to return home; if someone misses a paycheck and now faces the threat of eviction; or if someone’s salary is simply unable to keep up with the rising cost of living, among other contributing factors.

Mr. Bourne-Vanneck says that the needs of unhoused people are different based on what he described as the “spectrum of homelessness.” Some people need emergency accommodation, others require transitional housing, and some need permanent supportive housing. Some are “boarders”, sharing space with someone else in that person’s home, while others have no shelter at all.

There have been 318 people counted as homeless so far for fiscal year 2023, according to the most recently conducted Point-in-Time homelessness survey. This information is based on data collected by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and organized by the USVI Continuum of Care Council on Homelessness.

Of these 318 individuals, 207 are located on St. Thomas, with 90 each on St. Croix and St. John respectively. The number rivals the 314 homeless people reported for the entire 2019 fiscal year, 107 of whom were identified as being chronically homeless. Chronic homelessness is defined as a long term unsheltered experience, with several in this category suffering from mental or behavioral health disorders, and/or substance abuse disorders. Ms. Causey-Gomez attributed a drop in reported figures in 2021 (174 homeless) to a pandemic-related lack of sufficient human resource for that year’s Point-in-Time survey to count all the unsheltered people in the territory.

To address the lack of adequate housing and shelter for people who need it, Mr. Bourne-Vanneck told senators at Monday’s meeting that his organization plans to construct several units including a 40-bed facility at the Light of Christ Shelter for the Homeless, a

new building on St Croix.

"We are currently developing the architectural designs that will reconfigure and refurbish the existing buildings on the site and expect to issue an RFP for construction in the near future. CDBG [Community Development Block Grant] funding has already been approved for \$230,000 of the total projected construction budget of \$871,000. God willing, we hope to have this new shelter in operation by the beginning of 2024," he shared.

Catholic Charities, through its Bethlehem House Shelters, operated emergency shelters on St. Thomas and St. Croix. After the hurricanes in 2017, the St. Thomas location remained operable, while the St. Croix location at the Herbert Grigg Complex was destroyed.

With the assistance and support of the Catholic Diocese, the Catholic Charities is also in the process of developing a new emergency shelter in Coral Bay, St. John, and is in the process of relocating the Bethlehem House facility to its nearby property in Hospital Ground. There, it will construct a new 12-unit emergency shelter facility with separate rooms that will provide a total of 40 beds over three facility wings, along with kitchen, common area and administration offices.

While this is good news for many seeking temporary shelter, it's also an indication of the demand in that area.

Even with the data collected, Mr. Bourne-Vanneck said he is unable to quantify the true number of homeless people in the territory. "That number is always a gross understatement of the problem and that's partly because the people who have to make that headcount ... over three-quarters of them are volunteers."

Other challenges in escaping homelessness include inadequate funding, funding delays, and a low threshold that forces low-income earners out of the benefit program. Once a homeless person starts working and makes over a certain amount, they no longer qualify for benefits specifically targeted towards homeless individuals.

Both Mr. Bourne-Vanneck and Ms. Causey-Gomez agree that homelessness in the USVI is far beyond the capacity of individual agencies.

Kendall Tutein, DHS director for Nonprofits and Support, said that to design a system that works, there must be unison among entities working towards the same goal. Such a coordinated group, she said, would be responsible for analyzing what the best system is and make recommendations for putting councils in place.

"I don't know if there is funding to support something like this but in trainings and conferences that I have gone to in the U.S., there are designated people who work together to establish a coordinated entry system, who look at the homeless management information system, who helps manage the continuum of care council and help providers on the ground," she explained.

Ms. Tutein said it will take away the confusion of having numerous housing agencies and would funnel finances in such a manner that the use of funds can be optimized.