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With 6,000 Residents on Waiting Lists For Housing, Senators Scold VIHA Executives For Tortoise-like Pace of Development

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Legislators were not satisfied that the Virgin Islands Housing Authority on Monday was unable to say when it would complete its current housing projects to offer much-needed accommodations to residents in the territory.

VIHA said it had 100 units available for occupancy between St. Thomas and St. Croix and have marked 520 units for demolition. Meanwhile, approximately 800 applicants remain on the public housing waiting list.

Overall, there are 6,000 people on various waiting lists, with 1,085 families on the tenant-based waiting list. These families have been waiting since 2021 to be approved for rental properties,

while families on other programs have been waiting for five years or more.

Robert A. Graham, VIHA executive director, said to members of the Senate Committee on Housing, Transportation and Telecommunications that his agency would be able to repair and lease 97 percent of its units by the third quarter of this year, but when questioned by legislators about an exact completion date, he was not able to provide a timeline. Last October, Mr. Graham said 300 units would have come online in 2023.

On Monday, however, he said that the projects are “ongoing” and that he could provide a schedule of each project after the committee hearing. VIHA is currently building eight priority housing developments that could provide almost 900 families with homes.

His response, Senator Donna Frett-Gregory said, left no room for hope among Virgin islanders who have been living in squalor since the 2017 hurricane season. She questioned whether the department had a plan or any timelines, noting that anything less would be an insufficient response.

“That’s not enough for the people of the Virgin islands ... you have to have some plan in place - 2026, 2025, 2024 - when? It cannot be ongoing, where is the hope?” she asked.

Senator Kenneth Gittens also expressed displeasure with the response and felt that VIHA had no plans in place even while they planned to demolish hundreds of old units to build new ones. “When people that come before us that’s well paid, we expect to get responses and we’re not receiving the responses that we expected today,” he said, after questioning the salary of the executives who altogether make nearly \$1 million yearly.

He used the word “oppression” to describe the afternoon’s proceedings, saying that the treatment of Virgin Islanders in that situation is “unjust.”