VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

My Brother's Workshop
The population of the USVI includes 65,000 people who are exceptionally dependent on government services: 56,500 are people with low incomes, and the rest are the elderly, young children, juvenile delinquents, and people with mental and physical disabilities. The Virgin Islands Department of Human Services (VIDHS) serves all of these people through programs that provide financial, medical, and nutrition support to low-income populations, help the elderly in their homes and in assisted living facilities, prepare young children for kindergarten, supervise and reintegrate juvenile delinquents, and support those with disabilities.

The hurricanes increased the need for all of these programs—occurring because people’s homes were damaged, their sources of employment were gone, or because of the physical and psychological distress that the storms caused. At the same time, the ability of VIDHS to support these populations was reduced: the storms damaged the department’s facilities and left them without power and communications and made it more difficult for staff to come into work. In the months that followed the storms, VIDHS largely managed to continue delivering its services—but there were delays, and much staff effort went into improvising solutions on the spot.

In the future, stronger (though not necessarily more frequent) hurricanes will make it likely that similar challenges will repeat. Other climate risks like greater heat will further contribute to these climate challenges because of the aging population, causing the demand for VIDHS services to swell even more.

To ensure that VIDHS can continue to support the people who depend on its services, the department will, among other measures, rebuild and strengthen its senior homes and youth rehabilitation facilities, switch to underground fiber communications systems that proved highly resilient in the 2017 storms so that programs like SNAP (which require Internet connections) can function, establish a new senior center on the West End of St. Croix, expand its emergency shelters, and revise its emergency plans to include more nonprofits and improve communication with the public.
VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

HOW THE SYSTEM WORKS

The Territory’s 65,000 vulnerable citizens—56,500 low-income and 8,500 in other categories—are served by a network of VIDHS and nongovernmental facilities that include nursing homes, senior centers, and facilities for children. Funding for the low-income populations primarily comes from the federal government; funding for other groups is primarily local.

Vulnerable populations and the programs that help them

The Territory’s vulnerable populations include several groups: the low-income, the elderly, children under the age of five, juvenile delinquents, and the physically and mentally disabled. Low-income populations require support with health care, nutrition, and job and training opportunities. The needs of the elderly range from getting assistance in the home with things like cooking, cleaning, and doing laundry to being taken care of in 24-hour nursing homes and being protected from abuse. Children, especially from lower income families, need help preparing for kindergarten; some need to be protected from child abuse as well. Juvenile delinquents need supervision and support. Finally, the physically and mentally disabled need help with daily living tasks as well as training and support to become more self-sufficient.

The programs in the Territory that support these groups are of two different types: financial programs that support the general low-income populations and client programs that work with the more specifically defined vulnerable populations.

Financial programs include:

- Medical Assistance Program (known as Medicaid in the rest of the United States), which allows people with low incomes to obtain medical care;
- Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, also known as Food Stamps), which provides food help to families and individuals below the poverty line;
- Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), which provides on-the-job training and employment to single mothers.

Client programs for the elderly include:

- Homes for the elderly, which provide 24-hour care;
- Adult Protective Services (APS), which investigates possible abuse or neglect of adults by caregivers and provides support to families with adults with special needs;
- Senior centers, which provide a communal setting for senior activities;
- Meals on Wheels, which sends out hot meals to homebound seniors;
- Homemakers, which has people assisting seniors with daily activities like cleaning, cooking, and laundry.

Client programs for children include:

- Children and Family Services, which manages cases of child abuse and neglect and also oversees the Territory’s foster care system;
- Head Start, which works with children ages two years nine months to five years to prepare them for kindergarten.
Finally, juvenile justice programs oversee all pre-delinquent and delinquent juveniles up to age 19, while Vocational Rehab provides assistance to individuals with physical and mental disabilities by offering them training and programs to increase self-sufficiency.

The total vulnerable population in all of these groups is approximately 65,000 people—56,500 low-income people supported through financial programs (26,500 in MAP, 29,400 in SNAP, and 627 in TANF), 6,300 elderly, 1,100 children, several hundred juvenile delinquents, and 400 disabled persons.

Physical facilities

VIDHS runs several physical facilities to deliver all of these programs. The department’s client facilities include Herbert Grigg Home for the Elderly in St. Croix (a nursing home with a capacity of 40), Queen Louise Home for the Aged in St. Thomas (a nursing home with a capacity of 29), Youth Rehabilitation Center in St. Croix (a facility for youthful offenders and juveniles ordered by the court), three senior centers (one on each island), and 16 Head Start centers. Offices and support facilities include Mars Hill on St. Croix (running SNAP, MAP, and TANF programs), Commissioner’s Office on St. Croix, and also the Office of Intake and Emergency Services on St. Croix (usually the first point of contact for the public). VIDHS facilities on St. Thomas all are located at the Knud Hansen Complex.

Nongovernmental programs and organizations

Several nongovernmental programs provide additional support to the Territory’s vulnerable populations. These include Catholic Charities, which operates one Bethlehem Shelter in Kingshill, St. Croix, and the other in Hospital Ground, St. Thomas; the Village, which provides mental health and substance abuse treatment in Sion Hill, St. Croix; The Women’s Coalition on St. Croix; the Family Resource Center on St. Thomas, which offers services to victims of domestic abuse; Kidscope on St. Thomas, which provides services to children who are victims of abuse, neglect, sexual molestation, family disputes, or have issues with anger management; the Men’s Coalition on St. Croix, which works with male batterer through individual and group counseling; and the nonprofit 10,000 Helpers, which provides support for individuals struggling with mental health issues on St. Croix.

There are several other nonprofit and faith-based organizations providing services to the community in both districts.

Funding

VIDHS is sponsored through a combination of federal and local funds: the local funds tend to focus on supporting the client-based services, while federal funds mainly attend to the department’s financial programs. Locally funded programs include Children and Family Services, Juvenile Justice, and Senior Citizen Affairs. Federally funded programs are made up of SNAP, TANF, MAP, and Head Start. Through grant opportunities like Sexual Assault Victims Grant, Criminal Victims Fund, and the Crisis Grant program, VIDHS also funds local nonprofit organizations that help meet the needs of the community. Nonprofits also do their own fund-raising.

IMPACT OF THE HURRICANES

The impact of the hurricanes was twofold: they increased demand for the services of VIDHS and, at the same time, made it more difficult for the department to deliver those services. The staff improvised solutions and was able to reorganize service delivery, but some programs experienced delays and outages of up to two months.

Increased demand

In both St. Croix and St. Thomas-St. John districts, the need for services greatly increased in the aftermath of the storms. The storms made homes uninhabitable, left some families with no source of income, and forced them to rely on VIDHS services like SNAP, MAP, and Meals on Wheels for basic needs—making it clear in the process that many members of the USVI community had already been teetering on the edge of financial instability before the storms hit.
Facility damage and service impact

The storms damaged the department’s ability to deliver most of its services in the face of increased demand. In particular, the following were affected:

- The offices of financial assistance programs; (MAP, SNAP, and TANF) were without power and connectivity and did not reopen until November 2017
- Senior centers on both St. Thomas and St. Croix were closed; the St. Croix center reopened in October, and the center on St. Thomas reopened Thanksgiving week, both in temporary locations;
- Meals on Wheels and Homemakers programs had stoppages of two days on St. Croix and five days on St. Thomas because of vehicle damage, but the department was able to borrow vehicles from other departments and continued operating shortly there after;
- Homes for the elderly experienced physical damage, but continued operating;
- Adult Protective Services, Children and Family Services, Office of Intake and Emergency Services, and Juvenile Justice were all displaced but continued to operate from other locations; offices in St. Thomas and St. John experienced issues with mold.

Response and recovery

Before the storms, VIDHS had already been dealing with a staffing deficit; between the post-storm increase in demand and damage to facilities, delivering services became a significant challenge. Many staff members worked longer: either longer hours, especially at the 24-hour facilities like the Youth Rehabilitation Center and Herbert Grigg, or additional days, picking up shifts at the emergency shelters or the Emergency Operations Center (EOC). Service delivery began to return to normal by around January 2018.

FUTURE CHALLENGES RESULTING FROM CLIMATE CHANGE

In the future, VIDHS facilities and services will see severe risks from hurricanes and their effects and mild to moderate risks from rising sea levels, temperature increase, and changes in precipitation.

Hurricane winds, rainfall, and storm surge

The greatest risk to VIDHS facilities comes from hurricanes and their effects. As with the 2017 storms, the effects will include direct damage to facilities, impacts of failure of other systems like power and telecommunications, and impact on staff that may be unable to come to work for long periods of time. Damage to 24-hour facilities that house youth and elderly populations is a particularly high risk.

Rising sea levels

Overall impacts on the system will be minimal, but sea level rise will increase the effects of hurricane storm surge. Two VIDHS sites located in coastal areas may be subject to flooding and impacts of erosion as a result: the Richmond Senior Center/Head Start and the Marley Head Start.
Temperature increase

Higher temperatures mean that most VIDHS buildings will need to use air conditioning more frequently than before. Specifically, 24-hour facilities like YRC, Herbert Grigg Home for the Elderly, and Queen Louise Home for the Elderly will need to be better prepared with backup generators to operate the AC units in the event the power goes out. Demand for services may also increase as heat begins to affect vulnerable populations—especially the elderly. Rising temperatures may also affect lower income families and individuals in their homes: many of them do not have air conditioning and may end up more exposed to mosquito-borne diseases.

Precipitation changes

Most VIDHS facilities depend on cisterns for water, and, with longer dry spells, cisterns will run dry faster and more often. 24-hour facilities may see extreme shortages, as water is used for cooking, showering, and most aspects of daily living.

REBUILD AND STRENGTHEN CLIENT SERVICE AND PROGRAM SUPPORT BUILDINGS

The 2017 hurricanes showed that the facilities used to provide VIDHS services could not withstand extreme climate events. The main buildings need to be strengthened in order to survive future storms; in the process, they can also be upgrad ed to improve their functioning.

Initiative 1

Rebuild, strengthen, and expand Herbert Grigg Home for the Elderly

Herbert Grigg Home for the Elderly was damaged in the storms but continued operating. In the future, damage will need to be repaired, and, since the current capacity is 80, with only two wings designed for long-term care, capacity will need to be expanded as well to accommodate greater future needs.

VIDHS will add a new wing to this facility to increase capacity to 140. The new wing will hold 20 rehabilitation beds and 40 assisted living beds, and will also have the ability to increase capacity to house an emergency special needs shelter of 20 beds. Repairs will also be made to the current building: central air conditioning will be added, electrical wiring will be upgraded, and the roof will be fixed and stabilized. Funding for this expansion and renovation is expected to come from the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG); funding for hurricane-related damage will come from FEMA.

INITIATIVES FOR INCREASING RESILIENCE IN SERVING VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

Keeping future risks in mind, VIDHS will pursue four strategies in the coming years to be able to serve vulnerable populations: first, rebuild and strengthen existing buildings; second, better serve some of the existing vulnerable populations through expanding programs; third, better prepare for disasters by strengthening connectivity, power, and transportation infrastructure; and fourth, better prepare through emergency planning and preparedness.
Initiative 2

**Rebuild, strengthen, and expand Queen Louise Home for the Elderly**

Queen Louise Home suffered small-scale damage in the storms but continued operating. However, before the hurricanes, the home’s second floor had been condemned due to mold issues and water leaks, which limited capacity to just 29 beds at this facility.

VIDHS will relocate the facility to another building, making it possible to increase capacity to 100 beds. The current home will be refurbished and repaired to house a much-needed senior center as well as an Emergency Special Needs shelter. Funding will be provided by CDBG.

Initiative 3

**Rebuild and strengthen Youth Rehabilitation Center**

Youth Rehabilitation Center (YRC) suffered some damage in the storms, and, similar to Queen Louise, there were areas of the facility that were in disrepair prior to the storms. That includes the intake unit, the kitchen, and the courtyard, all of which are currently unusable.

VIDHS will repair the damaged areas. In addition, new bathrooms, new kitchen equipment, as well as upgrades to the cameras and radios, will be considered for this facility. No funding source has been identified yet.

Initiative 4

**Rebuild and strengthen Commissioner Office and office facilities at Mars Hill**

The Homes for the Elderly and YRC house VIDHS clients directly, but central VIDHS office facilities make it possible to deliver services to clients—especially those who depend on financial programs. VIDHS’s main office facilities, particularly the Commissioner Office and the Mars Hill facility, were damaged in the storms. These offices were not fully functional for many months after the storms, which made delivering services very difficult.

VIDHS will rebuild the damaged facilities and strengthen them to prevent the 2017 scenario from repeating. Particular attention will be paid to power and telecommunications capabilities.

**EXPAND CAPACITY AND UPGRADE PROGRAM DELIVERY TO ASSIST UNDERSERVED SEGMENTS**

As climate risks increase, so will the demand for VIDHS services in the aftermath of major events. The department will respond by expanding services for seniors and children in areas that are currently underserved.

Initiative 5

**Create a new senior center on the West End of St. Croix**

The West End of St. Croix does not currently have a senior center, however, VIDHS has an unused facility at Aldersville that could be turned into a new senior center. This conversion would allow VIDHS to have a hub in the West End in order to reach more rural areas where seniors can become homebound. A West End center in Aldersville would also provide an opportunity to increase capacity by working with homemakers to help support VIDHS staff in the area. It would also allow VIDHS to more easily make deliveries for Meals on Wheels and help expand other West End services.

VIDHS will create new senior center on the West End of St. Croix, subject to availability of funding.

Initiative 6

**Expand child services capacity**

Children's services provided crucial support in the aftermath of the storms—but some facilities were damaged; subsequently there was unmet demand for several months.

VIDHS will either increase service for pre school age children through more Head Start centers or expand program capacity through additional licensing for day care and day camp facilities. The department will
also consider expanding school centers that encourage and support juveniles in the Territory with structure and positive social interactions and therefore serve as preventive care for at-risk adolescents.

REBUILD AND STRENGTHEN CONNECTIVITY, POWER SUPPLY, AND TRANSPORTATION

In the face of future storms, stronger buildings alone are not sufficient—the department also needs the ability to use them. VIDHS will therefore work to strengthen the secondary systems upon which the functioning of its programs may come to depend in the case of another hazardous event.

Initiative 7

Strengthen connectivity and power backup options in support facilities

VIDHS services mainly require the presence of staff, but some, especially the financial programs, depend heavily on power and telecommunications. For example, with programs like SNAP, electricity and a connection to the Internet are needed to check eligibility and distribute benefits.

The storm damage to electricity and communication networks made it impossible to administer such programs for up to two months after the storms as the department did not have backup power and communications solutions. In some cases, even when temporary secondary sources for electricity and Internet became available, VIDHS may not have been able to use them due to the damage at the...
facilities that would have housed them. As facilities are strengthened in the future, it will be important to ensure that they can not only survive storms physically but can also support program delivery amidst communication and power outages.

To address power issues, VIDHS will ensure that backup generators are available at critical facilities and that those generators are regularly inspected, fueled, and maintained. The department will also examine the feasibility of installing off-grid solutions like solar photovoltaics (solar PV) panels and battery storage.

To address communications issues, the department will switch to underground fiber communications by working with viNGN and Viya, as necessary. Buried fiber networks proved highly resilient in the 2017 storms and did not suffer major outages.

Initiative 8
Secure additional vehicles and create transportation redundancies

The storms damaged many of the department’s vehicles. As a result, delivery of services like Meals on Wheels was disrupted for several days until the department could find alternative vehicles.

VIDHS will work on securing vehicles in a safe and unexposed location prior to the next event. In addition, the purchase of new vehicles to remove any older, problematic vehicles from the fleet will be a priority for the division of operations, as will be ensuring that routine vehicle maintenance is performed regularly.

Initiative 9
Develop emergency plans for each program

The 2017 hurricane season severely disrupted VIDHS operations. The adjustment would have been simpler and speedier if there had been emergency plans in place to be followed.

Each VIDHS program will develop an emergency plan. Specifically:

- Children and Family Services will plan for additional emergency short-term foster care placements as well as residential beds to be made available to displaced foster care children;
- The department will keep on hand emergency petty cash reserves for purchases until ERP (the online procurement system) is up and running;
- Juvenile Justice and YRC will plan for evacuation of residents as well as for relief for staff manning the facility during storms;
- Head Start will plan for redistribution of clients and work around double sessions and sharing spaces;
- Senior Citizen Affairs will plan for increased need for services like Meals on Wheels or beds at homes for the elderly. The Department will also develop an evacuation plan for residents with functional or behavioral health needs;
- Departments like human resources, payroll, and fiscal programs will plan for having alternate spaces, reassigning personnel, and making emergency funds available.

IMPROVE EMERGENCY PLANNING AND PREPAREDNESS

One can never do enough pre-disaster emergency planning or post-disaster public communication—and the different departments of VIDHS can improve on both counts. VIDHS will develop emergency plans for all of its different programs (including by working with nonprofit partners) and will improve how it communicates with the public.
Initiative 10
Expand special needs shelter capacity

Special needs shelters can currently operate from inside both homes for the elderly, but the need for this capacity was severely underestimated and many more residents were in need of those services than VIDHS could accommodate. In addition, before being managed by VIDHS, special needs shelters were under the management of the Department of Health; insufficient interagency communication and coordination caused delays and interruptions in service.

VIDHS will expand the capacity for special needs shelters at both Herbert Grigg and Queen Louise facilities and will determine the number of staff needed to service that population’s needs.

Initiative 11
Magnify community communication through public relations

During the response effort, there were significant delays in relaying information to the public regarding changes in VIDHS operations.

VIDHS will revise its emergency communications plans with a focus on keeping the community updated, including by making the Director of Community Affairs an integral part of the planning and response process.
**Initiative 12**  
Include nonprofits in the emergency planning process

Some nonprofit agencies have deeper insight than VIDHS does into the individualized needs of distinct communities in the Territory and can deliver services that supplement what VIDHS can offer. That includes providing permanent, temporary, and/or emergency sheltering and social services for homeless, abused, neglected, displaced, and disabled persons of all ages; rehabilitation services for individuals with psychological needs, for the physically disabled, and for those facing social challenges; after-school educational enrichment programs and adolescent to early adult career building engagement activities; and residential care and door-to-door transportation for the elderly and disabled.

VIDHS will include community-based nonprofits on each island in its emergency planning process to make sure that their individual abilities are best used in the next emergency.