

STATEMENT

OF

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BEFORE  
THE

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERIOR, ENERGY & ENVIRONMENT  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

ST. THOMAS LEGISLATURE BUILDING  
ST. THOMAS, U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS

“The Historic 2017 Hurricane Season: Impacts on the U.S. Virgin Islands”

Submitted  
By

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## **Introduction**

Good morning, Chairman Farenthold, Ranking Member Plaskett, and members of the Subcommittee. I am William Vogel, the Federal Coordinating Officer for the disaster response in the U.S. Virgin Islands following Hurricanes Irma and Maria. On behalf of U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Secretary Nielsen and Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Administrator Long, thank you for the opportunity to discuss DHS and FEMA's efforts to assist with response and recovery in the U.S. Virgin Islands following recent devastating events.

## **2017 Hurricane Season**

This year's historic hurricane season has been a true test of the Nation's ability to respond to and recover from multiple concurrent disasters. The United States has had three major hurricanes make landfall this season: Harvey, Irma, and Maria. The impacts of these events are substantial. Roughly 25.8 million people were affected by these three storms – eight percent of the entire U.S. population. FEMA, our partner agencies in the federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial governments, in addition to vital volunteer relief organizations and the private sector, work in concert, with unity of effort, to serve the needs of disaster survivors.

FEMA alone cannot deliver disaster assistance to this vast number of survivors. Unity of effort is required for disaster response and recovery on any scale, but especially during this historic season. All levels of government, non-profit organizations, private sector businesses, and survivors must work together, each drawing upon their unique skills and capabilities, to meet the needs of disaster survivors.

## **Hurricanes Irma and Maria: Impacts and Initial Response Efforts in the U.S. Virgin Islands**

On September 6, the eye of Hurricane Irma made official landfall in the British Virgin Islands (just to the north of the U.S. Virgin Islands) as a catastrophic Category 5. Extreme winds and heavy rainfall ravaged parts of the U.S. Virgin Islands, particularly St. Thomas and St. John.

President Trump approved an emergency declaration on September 5, with a major disaster declaration (DR-4335) following on September 7. This disaster declaration made federal funding available to affected individuals on the islands of St. John and St. Thomas through FEMA's Individual Assistance Program. Federal funding was also initially made available to territorial and eligible local governments and certain non-profit organizations for emergency work and repair or replacement of facilities; funding was available for all areas of the U.S. Virgin Islands (FEMA's Public Assistance Program, emergency work, categories A-B). The disaster declaration has since been amended to expand the assistance by including Public Assistance, permanent work, categories C-G and Hazard Mitigation Grant Program for all areas of the U.S. Virgin Islands.

The Federal Government deployed assets to the Caribbean in anticipation of the storm, including incident management assistance teams, urban search and rescue teams, and medical assistance

teams. Prior to Irma's impact, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) evacuated dialysis patients and their caregivers to Puerto Rico so they could continue receiving life-saving treatment. As a former Defense Coordinating Officer in FEMA Regions I, II and IV, I understood the value of having the Department of Defense on the ground with us pre-impact. The Region II Defense Coordinating Element deployed with the FEMA Regional Incident Management Assistance Team (IMAT) to St. Croix on September 4. These deployments allowed FEMA to coordinate quickly with territorial officials and perform rapid problem analysis to prioritize immediate federal support needs following the storm.

FEMA and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) co-located with the U.S. Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency (VITEMA) in downtown St. Croix from the onset. Since the facility is close to the Government House, the proximity allowed continuous collaboration on priorities and objectives with territorial leadership and our VITEMA partners.

The collaboration took a public form as well, as I joined Governor Mapp at daily news conferences at Government House to keep the public informed of response activities and outline the path forward.

Within days of Irma's impact:

- FEMA sent more than 575,000 meals and 380,000 liters of water to the USVI for the response effort. These life-saving commodities, along with cots, baby formula, temporary roofing materials, and other necessities, went to the U.S. Virgin Islands National Guard for distribution at local Points of Distribution in St. John and St. Thomas. These items also went to shelters operated by our recovery partners.
- The USS Wasp was stationed off the coast of the U.S. Virgin Islands to conduct medical evacuations of critical care patients from St. Thomas to St. Croix and to perform damage assessments in support of the territorial government.
- HHS and U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) had medical teams supporting overwhelmed hospitals and partnering with urban search and rescue teams to locate and evacuate dialysis patients.
- The U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) conducted port reconstitution efforts and damage assessment overflights.
- The U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) responders were on the ground in St. Thomas and St. Croix for electricity restoration tracking and technical assistance. DOE was also working with the USACE to coordinate emergency power generation in St. Thomas and St. John.
- Generators arrived for installation on St. Thomas and St. John critical facilities, including shelters, hospitals, emergency service buildings, and water treatment plants. The USACE deployed a Power Planning and Response Team to assist with assessments and generator installations at these critical facilities.
- FEMA Mobile Emergency Response Support (MERS) personnel were on the ground to support communication needs for the U.S. Virgin Islands.
- A FEMA Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) Incident Support Team-Advance element and Virginia Task Force One (VA-TF1), a National Incident Management System Type 1 task force, were on the ground conducting operations in the U.S. Virgin Islands. FEMA had deployed additional USAR support, including Canine Search and logistics teams.

- U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) had coordinated with the USCG to deploy a 67-person Disaster Assistance Recovery Team for response and recovery work on St. Thomas.

Two weeks into response efforts from Hurricane Irma, the core of Hurricane Maria passed just south of the U.S. Virgin Islands on its way to Puerto Rico. Maria's outer eyewall devastated St. Croix with powerful winds and heavy rainfall, damaging the communications and power grid, destroying homes, and downing trees. President Trump approved a major disaster declaration for Hurricane Maria (DR-4340) on September 20, making FEMA's Individual Assistance, Public Assistance, and Hazard Mitigation Grant Programs available for the whole territory.

While St. Croix had been largely spared from the ravages of Irma, Maria's impact meant all three of the territory's main islands were devastated.

The joint federal and territorial response team launched a massive and united effort to meet survivors' immediate emergency and medical needs, restore communications, power, and water services, and address the disruptions to the islands' supply chain caused by sea and airport closures and the large quantities of debris blocking roadways.

After Hurricane Maria impacted the U.S. Virgin Islands, federal assets continued life-saving and life-sustaining operations, including:

- FEMA urban search and rescue operations began with initial damage assessments and intelligence reports. The USCG conducted search and rescue operations in St. Croix and surrounding waters.
- FEMA loaded vessels with more than 1.3 million meals, 2 million liters of water, 30 generators, and 6,000 cots that were already enroute to St. Thomas to offload once ports were open.
- The U.S. Army National Guard conducted security operations, route clearance, traffic control, and food and water distribution.
- The U.S. Marine Corps' 26<sup>th</sup> Marine Expeditionary Unit inserted an Air Control Element at the airport in St. Thomas in order to help open the airfield. The Federal Aviation Administration deployed a Mobile Air Traffic Control Tower (ATCT) to St. Thomas after Hurricane Irma. The Mobile ATCT was removed to a secure off island location prior to impact of Hurricane Maria and redeployed after the hurricane had passed.
- U.S. Northern Command conducted initial incident awareness and assessment missions using U.S. Navy and U.S. Marine Corps air assets.
- DOE deployed emergency responders to coordinate with the Western Area Power Administration (WAPA), the American Public Power Association, DOD, and FEMA to support grid damage assessment and power restoration efforts.
- A Joint Debris Task Force of territorial and federal agencies, including FEMA, USACE and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), was established to prioritize road clearing efforts and address the enormous quantity of debris that threatened public health and safety.

FEMA and our federal partners continue to push forward vigorously on the back-to-back recovery missions across the U.S. Virgin Islands. Our open, collaborative relationships with

Delegate Plaskett, Governor Mapp, and territorial government agencies provide a strong foundation as we work together on every front to meet survivors' needs and restore essential services.

Within two weeks of Maria's impact, we had more than 2,500 federal staff on the ground in the U.S. Virgin Islands – not including the more than 6,000 USCG and Title 10 DOD personnel, who were supporting both Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

The interagency effort to meet one of the governor's top objectives resulted in the opening of schools in St. Thomas and St. John just weeks after the hurricanes. In addition, many more schools have opened on all three islands, allowing students to move forward with the 2017-2018 school year. Supporting Governor Mapp's priority of getting schools reopened, USACE installed generators at schools and worked with the territorial Department of Education to assess options to provide classroom space for students at damaged schools. EPA personnel helped the U.S. Virgin Islands Department of Planning and Natural Resources and Department of Health to assess potential environmental dangers and water quality at the schools while local workers from the community, as well as personnel from the Danish Emergency Management Agency, assisted with the cleanup and repair efforts.

Hundreds of healthcare professionals from HHS and DOD supported and augmented local medical staff who were working steady 12-hour shifts in the weeks after the hurricanes. The military's 575<sup>th</sup> and 602<sup>nd</sup> Area Support Medical Companies (ASMC) established mobile medical units outside of St. Croix's Gov. Juan Luis Hospital and Medical Center as well as St. Thomas's Schneider Medical Center to offer backup support for patients needing medical care.

HHS continued to provide support for hospital recovery, public health, and behavioral health services. This includes providing aeromedical evacuation through the National Disaster Medical System, managing the care of medically-evacuated patients in Atlanta, working with the USVI Department of Health on vector-borne disease control, and advising on behavioral health programs for residents and first responders.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention had health communications experts on the island working with the U.S. Virgin Islands Department of Health to share public health messaging with the community, including information on mold cleanup, food and medication safety, and coping after a disaster.

FEMA coordinated with the American Bar Association and local legal aid organizations to provide free legal services to impacted residents, providing support restoring legal documents that were damaged or lost in the storm and with legal issues related to accessing disaster benefits.

On October 21, FEMA launched our local hire program in the U.S. Virgin Islands, providing assistance with applications and conducting interview sessions with candidates across the territory. As of March 1, 92 local hires are on the job at our Joint Field Office in St. Croix and our Area Field Offices on St. Thomas and St. John. These workers bring critical knowledge and skills to our workforce while supporting the ongoing recovery efforts in their communities. Hiring locally allows disaster survivors to get back to work and support the territory's recovery.

The USCG supported the U.S. Virgin Islands Department of Planning and Natural Resources (DPNR) to coordinate pollution mitigation and the recovery of 479 vessels that sank or were displaced as a result of the hurricanes. That mission is now complete.

Meanwhile, our FEMA Hazard Mitigation team has been compiling damage assessment information and meeting with territorial agencies to identify opportunities for mitigation and resiliency efforts on the islands. This team believes there are tremendous opportunities to strengthen infrastructure as well as public and private buildings to ensure future protection from storms.

### **The Road to Recovery**

FEMA and our federal partners will continue to support the U.S. Virgin Islands throughout the recovery process. FEMA is currently focused on augmenting territorial capabilities by providing medical services; supporting restoration activities in critical sectors such as communications, power, transportation, and water; and supporting debris removal efforts.

As of March 1, more than \$70 million in FEMA's Individual Assistance has been disbursed directly to survivors to help them get back on their feet. FEMA has also approved permanent housing construction for eligible homeowners who have a FEMA verified loss of at least \$17,000 as a result of the hurricanes. To date, 134 households meet the criteria for the Permanent Housing Construction-Repair program. FEMA representatives are reaching out to these eligible survivors to discuss their housing options. FEMA is also in the process of securing contractors to begin conducting repairs throughout the territory.

FEMA has also authorized funding for the Sheltering and Temporary Essential Power (STEP) program for the U.S. Virgin Islands. This program, which will be managed by the territorial government, allows residents to safely return to or remain in their homes as a form of shelter so they can focus on rebuilding and returning to normalcy. STEP is an emergency protective measure to perform basic, emergency work to keep survivors safe in their homes.

Because the communications challenges and power outages made it difficult for survivors to register for assistance or contact FEMA online or by phone, FEMA placed disaster survivor assistance teams on the ground throughout the territory to canvass hard-hit communities, assist survivors in registering for FEMA assistance, and provide resource referrals for their various needs. Disaster Survivor Assistance teams met with nearly 34,667 survivors directly and conducted more than 11,022 registrations.

FEMA's Disability Integration team has been in the U.S. Virgin Islands since Hurricane Irma to help coordinate the broad effort to assist all survivors. Team members are working closely with FEMA Individual Assistance specialists, HHS, the Virgin Islands Department of Health Services, the American Red Cross, the territory's aging and social services programs, and other partners to get goods and services to the islands' most vulnerable survivors. We partnered with the Atlanta-based relief organization Friends of Disabled Adults and Children to deliver hundreds of donated assistive medical devices to hurricane survivors in need.

FEMA and the Small Business Administration (SBA) established 10 Disaster Recovery Centers across the islands to directly support survivors, help them register for federal assistance, and answer questions about the assistance available to them. There have been more than 65,000 visits to these recovery centers since the first one opened in St. Croix on October 8.

As of March 1, SBA had approved \$457 million in loans to 6,777 homeowners, renters, businesses of all sizes, and private nonprofits (\$253.7 million for Irma and \$203.3 million for Maria). SBA also set up two Business Recovery Centers in the islands.

As of March 1 more than \$261 million has been obligated through FEMA's Public Assistance program, most of that for emergency protective measures, emergency power restoration and debris removal. More than 3,600 blue roofs have been installed. More than 867,000 cubic yards of debris has been collected. USACE installed a total of 180 generators at critical facilities; 13 remain in use. As of March 1, 514 federal employees were deployed to the U.S. Virgin Islands.

More than \$165 million of the \$261 million in Public Assistance grants from FEMA has been obligated to boost the emergency power restoration effort. As a result of amendments to the major disaster declarations for the U.S. Virgin Islands, FEMA is funding 100 percent of the costs of such emergency work for 180 days from the declaration dates.

The funds helped the U.S Virgin Islands' WAPA – the Water and Power Authority – cover the cost of bringing about 700 linemen from the mainland, as well as shipping in more than 10,000 poles (including many that can withstand 200 mph winds), about 5,000 transformers, 5.6 million feet of wire, and over 600 bucket, utility and trailer trucks, and derricks to dig holes in the islands' rocky terrain. Had we not brought in those resources, the governor estimated the power would not have returned until April at the earliest. FEMA also provided \$160 million in loans to the USVI Government and WAPA through the Community Disaster Loan program for operations costs.

FEMA, in coordination with Department of Health and Human Services Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration, has provided \$2.5 million in funding to the U.S. Virgin Islands Department of Health to provide individual and group crisis counseling services to impacted individuals and families across the island.

Patients in need of medical care not currently available on the islands have been transported to the mainland. The Virgin Islands Department of Health (DOH) coordinated with FEMA and HHS in this effort. When a patient has Medicare, Medicaid, or private insurance, the USVI government works with the local hospital to arrange for transportation to appropriate medical facilities. For patients who do not have Medicare, Medicaid, or private insurance, HHS coordinates with the USVI government, the local hospital and HHS partners in the National Disaster Medical System to move the patient to the continental U.S. FEMA reimburses the hospital or territory for this patient transport through the FEMA Public Assistance Program. Throughout the process, non-profit partners on the mainland and in the Virgin Islands continue to support medical evacuees and their families with case management and other human services.

A joint task force is conducting a detailed assessment of medical facilities, including Juan Luis Hospital, Schneider Hospital and the Myrah Keating Smith Community Health Center. This is an important step in determining the cost to repair or replace these facilities. In the meantime, FEMA, USACE, and HHS are working to provide temporary medical facilities so people do not have to travel to the mainland for treatment of critical care conditions.

In St. Croix, a three-suite operating room is scheduled to be installed in parking lots at Juan Luis Hospital in late May. The hospital has requested proposals to construct a temporary dialysis treatment facility at Juan Luis Hospital. A temporary medical facility is planned for the Virgin Islands Department of Health clinic at the Charles Harwood Medical Complex site and in St. Thomas, a temporary medical facility is planned for Schneider Hospital. In St. John, the Army Corps estimates completion of a temporary patient care clinic at Myrah Keating Smith Community Health Center by late May.

Thirteen schools were closed after the storms and students have been attending other schools on double shifts. The Virgin Islands Department of Education has identified 47 storm-damaged properties, including schools, headquarters, adult education centers, procurement warehouses, youth rehabilitation centers, and school lunch warehouses. FEMA is working with VITEMA and the Department of Education to assess requirements for temporary facilities for schools that have been damaged.

FEMA has assisted, community, and faith-based organizations in organizing Long Term Recovery Groups on each island. Members of these groups work to empower survivors in taking an active role in restoring their own communities. The government has named a Territorial Voluntary Agency Liaison to work with local and statewide volunteer groups in donations management, home repair, home rebuilding, and addressing other disaster-caused needs that are unmet by traditional government relief programs.

## **Conclusion**

Within two weeks in September, the U.S. Virgin Islands were hit by two catastrophic hurricanes. The road to recovery will be a long one, but we will continue to work with territorial and local partners, as well as Congress, throughout the recovery process. We will be here as long as we are needed.

For those of us who have been on the ground in the U.S. Virgin Islands since before the storms, it is a wonderful thing to be a part of this recovery and see the territory build back stronger. It is our goal to help the rebuilding effort implement mitigation and resiliency measures so that in future storms the impact will be lessened and millions of dollars saved. Progress continues to be made, but much of this recovery process still lies ahead.

I am grateful for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss this important mission, and I am happy to respond to any questions the subcommittee may have at this time. Thank you.