



**U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS)
Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties (CRCL)
Listening Session Recap, St. Thomas, USVI
May 16, 2018**

I. Introduction

The St. Thomas USVI listening session was held at the Yacht Haven Grande in Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas, USVI. In attendance were representatives of non-governmental organizations, service providers, community members, and government partners. Introductory speakers included:

- Cameron Quinn, DHS Officer for CRCL
- Linda Mastandrea, Director, FEMA Office of Disability Integration and Coordination (ODIC)
- Felecia Brownlow, Director Virgin Islands Association for Independent Living
- Kimberly Bandy, DHS CRCL, Moderator

The listening session began with Kimberly Bandy welcoming attendees and reviewing housekeeping rules for the session. Officer Quinn explained the purpose of the meeting was to hear about concerns and experiences related to the impact of the disaster had on individuals with disabilities and the surrounding areas. She asked that participants also share “what worked,” or effective practices. By better understanding these experiences, and in partnership with the state and local entities, including non-profit organizations, she noted that we can do more to improve preparedness, response, and recovery for persons with disabilities in time for the next hurricane season and other disasters

Prior to opening up the session for participants to make comments, Officer Quinn introduced Ms. Linda Mastandrea and Felecia Brownlow, the Director of the Virgin Islands Association for Independent Living.

II. Issues/concerns and Effective Practices Noted

A. Communication Access for People with Disabilities

- **Government¹ Agencies and Service Providers Should Improve Communication about Available Services** - Several community members said there was a disconnect between the different government agencies in terms of who would provide which service.
- **Government Officials and Newscasters Should Improve Communication for People who are Deaf** - Several individuals mentioned failures of TV crawls or news tickers. Individuals also mentioned that American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters were not seen on the TV screen when important announcements were made, for example, government announcements were made without closed captioning or ASL. St. Croix did get interpreters but not St. Thomas.
- **The Government Should Have a Plan to Address the Lack of Available Sign Language Interpreters** – Community members told us that many sign language interpreters have left the island due to lack of steady work. This was a problem prior to the hurricane but became more acute after. Community members told us that hospitals, law enforcement, legal systems/courts, and human services agencies should have a roster of interpreters. Several individuals told us many shelters failed to have communications for deaf persons.

B. Preparedness and Evacuation

- **The government Needs to Do More to Evacuate People who Require Medical Assistance** – Several community representatives spoke about the lack of urgency in getting people off the island for necessary medical treatment that was not available on the island, In some cases, people were bounced between facilities because of a lack of supports. Many families left the island with family members who needed medical assistance. There was a huge impact on families who

¹ The Government” or “Governments” as used in this document refers to federal or territorial governments depending upon which of these entities has a role or responsibilities in the area described.

had to pay \$3,000 to evacuate a family member who needed medical treatment.

- **There should be better individual and community preparedness -** Many persons expressed that they had gotten comfortable or complacent after Hurricane Marilyn in 1995 and had not done enough to prepare for the hurricanes. A Disability Rights Center representative told us the biggest challenge was the lack of planning, for example, there were no plans for feeding people with disabilities in private homes. According to the representative, there were only two places to get food and no pre-planning had been done to get food to people with disabilities. The representative went on to say that training is needed so individuals can learn to take care of themselves.
- **Medication Refills Should be Available -** An organization representative indicated medications were scarce and many people ran out. People were looking for 60 to 90 day approvals for prescription refills from local pharmacies to have medications in case they ran out before power went out. Most of these requests were denied.
- **Governments Should Plan to Communicate with Communities in Disasters When Communication Systems Falter -** The Disability Rights Center representative told us some people in the disability community had weather radios, however many transmitters were down and people could not get important announcements.
- **Governments and Service Providers Need to have Information on People with Disabilities Before an Emergency -** A Disability Rights Center representative suggested all governmental entities including NGOs should work together on a list or registry. He said a major problem during the storm was that the Department of Human Services intake process for services was down, which forced people to go to four or five different places. The local FEMA Disability Integration Specialist said there are multiple databases but that the USVI Housing Authority had the best database list but many people were not on that list. The FEMA specialist went on to say that, the Virgin Island Emergency Management Association (VITEMA) and Human Services needed resource data to assess what was going on and how to locate people in order to provide direct services.

- **Sensory kits should be distributed and made widely available** - A medical doctor from the University of the Virgin Islands told us there is a need for sensory kits to keep kids calm during the storm and during the recovery. She told us a request was made to the USVI Maternal and Child Health/Children with Special Health Care Needs Bureau for more sensory kits.
- **Governments Should Improve Access to food, medicine, and basic services** – A local FEMA official told us that access to meals needs improvement. People had to wait in long lines to get meals and resources and he told us that there were many amputations because of lack of diabetes medications and no ice to keep medicines cool.

C. Sheltering

- **Governments and Service Providers Should Improve Communication about Sheltering with Persons who are Deaf** - An organization representative told us that shelters were up and running but people with disabilities including those who are deaf and hard of hearing did not get information or updates on space availability at the shelters. Information and updates need to be centralized.
- **Shelter Providers Should Provide Training on Sheltering of Persons with Disabilities** - The Director of Virgin Island Association for Independent Living told us she visited shelters daily after the storms and saw several blind individuals with plates of food placed in front of them who had no idea the food was there. There needs to be training for shelter personnel.
- **There Should be Planning and Improvements for Transporting Persons to Shelters** - An organization representative told us transportation problems on the islands for persons with disabilities was a big issue because the public transportation system was not operating right after the storm and access to resources and services for persons with disabilities was a major challenge. This was also a challenge for seniors living alone.
- **There Should be Improvements in Sheltering Planning and Operations and Disability Community Should be Part of this**

Planning Effort– A community member said that right after the storm, there were about 500 people in the shelters being fed every day by NGOs, people were washing clothes in buckets, and there were no contingency plans. According to community members, several takeaways from this hurricane are the need to build the skillsets of those in charge and to provide plans or criteria for operating a subsidized facility. Officer Quinn asked if there is a lack of training or high turnover. An organization representative replied that the disability community was not at the table making plans to ensure accessible bathrooms and showers were available. The representative went on to say that they have trained local police departments and met with local commissioners knowing they receive federal funds and there are still a lot of holes in the system.

- **There is a Need for More Resources for Persons with Disabilities -** A representative from the Virgin Islands Deaf and Hard of Hearing Advocates (VIDHHA) told us her primary concerns revolved around lack of resources on the islands. She had heard of individuals with waterlogged hearing aids during the storms.

D. Access to FEMA Resources and Programs

- **FEMA should ensure Disaster Recovery Centers (DRCs) are accessible** – Community members mentioned having to take people to FEMA DRCs that were not accessible. Several people mentioned the DRCs closed down and left many people unable to apply for services.
- **FEMA Should Improve Messaging about the Role of FEMA** – A community representative told us there is a lot about FEMA that residents need to know and have explained to them. Many people are confused about FEMA's roles.
- **FEMA Should Improve Access to FEMA Programs for Persons with Disabilities** - Several organization representatives says there was a lack of FEMA applications in Braille. Several individuals mentioned low vision and blind people trying to find FEMA applications that they could use. Additionally, several representatives told us there was no help available to fill out FEMA applications or as alternative, having applications in Braille.

- **Improvement in the Dissemination of FEMA information Needed** - Another organization representative told us communication was a huge issue, phones were down and community members needed radios to know what was going on. The Internet was not working, due to power outages and this resulted in a lack of FEMA information dissemination to small communities.
- **Sensitivity Training Needed for FEMA and Others** – Several community members told us the process for getting services was like a jigsaw puzzle. Community members recommended sensitivity training for FEMA, local emergency personnel, and Human Services personnel so they can learn how to treat people with disabilities respectfully during and after an emergency or crisis. The Disability Rights Center representative told us his center does this type of training for local law enforcement.

E. Services and Supports for Recovery

- **There is a Need for Greater Mental Health Services** - Several community members asked about the availability of mental health programs since community members suffered from depression. A USVI official mentioned that FEMA has counseling services contracts at the DRCs and that her office can provide referrals for local providers.
- **There is Continuing Need to Restore Services** - A participant told us that at the Lucinda A Millin Assisted Living Center the elevators are still out nine months after the hurricane. Currently, outpatient resources for ophthalmologist services are non-existent.

III. Conclusion

CRCL and FEMA thanked participants for sharing concerns and information about effective practices and encouraged participants to reach out after this meeting if they have additional concerns or questions that they did not bring up during the session.

Officer Quinn told the participants that some of the issues mentioned may be referred to the Department of Justice Disability Rights Section for review.