



**US Department of Homeland Security (DHS)
Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties (CRCL)
Listening Session Recap, St. Croix, USVI
May 17, 2018**

I. Introduction

The St. Croix USVI listening session was held on Thursday May 17th, 2018 from 9:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. at the VIYA Building in Christiansted, St. Croix, 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)
- Regis Phelan, Acting Director, FEMA Office of Equal Rights

The listening session began with Ms. Kimberly Bandy from DHS CRCL 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 who provided a brief overview of the activities of her office with regard to individuals with disabilities and disaster-related activities, and Regis Phelan who described the role of the Office of Equal Rights.

II. Issues/concerns and Effective Practices Noted

A. Communication Access for People with Disabilities

- **Governments Need to Plan to Address Community Needs Even When Communication Systems Falter** - A representative from the Virgin Islands Association of Independent Living said that community members experienced a communication deadlock during and after the storm and the only way to communicate was via text messages. Another representative stressed that communication to the public was very limited. She said, “It is like we are invisible.”

B. Preparedness and Evacuation

- **Governments¹ Should Better Plan Medical Evacuations** - The Territorial ADA Coordinator told us about her son who is quadriplegic and who was medically evacuated to Georgia. Other community members told us about the American Cancer Society treatment center closing in St. Thomas and St. Croix with no notice. The treatment center was demolished in St. Thomas. According to community members, people who needed cancer treatments had to be evacuated. Some cancer patients were flown to Puerto Rico, which was already declared a disaster area. An organization representative questioned the reasons why patients were evacuated to another declared disaster area.
- **There should be Improved Preparedness in Advance of a Disaster for People with Disabilities** - The Territorial ADA Coordinator told us she has two children, one with Down’s syndrome and the other a quadriplegic. Officer Quinn asked about preplanning for this next hurricane season and whether there was a committee or group that advocates can join.
 - The ADA coordinator told us there are several long-term recovery efforts, and long-term rebuilding teams where individuals with

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.

disabilities can participate and raise their concerns. According to the coordinator, one of the biggest obstacles with only two weeks to the start of the new hurricane season is trying to get a good list of key contacts. She hopes that because of the two storms those individuals with disabilities will recognize the need to self-identify and voluntarily register, so their information will be on file since it was very difficult finding people with disabilities that may need assistance.

- **Medication Refills Should be Available for Emergencies** - The ADA Coordinator said that because they had some warning that the hurricane was coming she wanted to make sure her quadriplegic son had a 30-day supply of his needed medication in the event the pharmacy was destroyed. The ADA Coordinator told us that right after Hurricane Irma, the Commissioner of the Department of Health tried to get a waiver so that people could get a supply of medication from the pharmacy before the storm, but she did not think the waiver was granted. The Coordinator indicated that she would make sure to address this with the Commissioner and confirm if prior to a declaration of emergency, there is something that could be done, especially for diabetics, to be able to pick up their medication. She told us she would have to check with the legal team and the Department of Health. Officer Quinn offered that to the extent that this is a Medicaid issue, to let DHS know and we would try to work with USVI at the federal level to resolve this issue for the future.
- **Planning Efforts Should Consider that People May Only be Able to Make Cash Transactions** – An organization representative shared her experiences standing in line for hours at Kmart to buy medication to discover only cash was being accepted. All the ATM machines were down after the storm so buying supplies was a challenge.
- **Planning Efforts Should Consider that Some Medications Need to be Refrigerated** - Community members reported there were long lines to purchase ice. Ice was critical to the people who are diabetic and needed insulin, which has to be refrigerated. Community members reported having to choose to keep either food or medications refrigerated.
- **Planning Efforts Should Consider Transportation Needs**- Several community members told us they did not have anybody to assist people with mobility issues. The Virgin Island Public transportation System

(VITRAN Plus) paratransit service stopped operating on the weekends after the storm. People with disabilities had no transportation unless they had personal transportation or a friend willing to help them out. Several community members told us that because you have a disability, it should not mean being housebound. One resident told us, "If I wanted to go to church on Sunday, I can't go. Unless I can get someone to come and pick me up. I am visually impaired. I am blind. I can't drive and I live alone and I don't know anybody with a car. How am I supposed to get around during the weekend? If I do not rush and do everything from Monday to Friday, I cannot do anything on Saturday or Sunday. They are treating us like stepchildren."

- **Governments and Communities Should Better Identify People with Disabilities and/or Have a Database for Information on People with Disabilities** - An organization representative told us she believed that for any disaster there should be a database and a printed list with people of disabilities to include their name, phone number, addresses, age, and nature of their disability and that this list should include whether the person lives in a home or whether they live with someone or not; medications taken by that person and should also include a family member's information. She went on to say that the list should be laminated and shared with agencies such as the Red Cross, the Rescue Squad, the National Guard, Homeland Security, FEMA and any other agency that can assist with emergencies.
 - The ADA Coordinator told us the USVI does not have a central comprehensive database of individuals with disabilities to include where they live. In the past, there were attempts to have a voluntary registry but because it has to be voluntary, people could not be forced to self-identify so it never happened.
 - She went on to tell us that maybe now, people with disabilities would recognize the need to register to get government resources. She elaborated saying that "recent hurricanes made it evident that many people of the USVI that live with disabilities have never entered the school system. The parents have never registered from the services from the government whatsoever. They remain at home hidden." She went on to say that her office has cultivated inclusion in bringing individuals with disabilities out to the forefront.

C. Sheltering

- **Distribution Centers Should Accommodate People who are Deaf -** One deaf community member shared her experiences getting services at a distribution center. She told us the lines were incredibly long, too hot for all of the people that were in those lines to stand on for that length of time. She tried to tell security and the military that was there, that she was deaf and what she needed but the communication was not good. They eventually realized she was deaf but she did not have an interpreter or anybody who could assist her to communicate. They did end up assisting her by “writing notes back and forth.”

D. Access to FEMA Resources and Programs

- **FEMA Should Plan to Disseminate Information in Advance of a Disaster Since Communication Systems May be Impacted after a Disaster -** Several community members commented about hearing on the radio that you could register for FEMA on the internet. However, people did not have access to the internet and found it very difficult to navigate the FEMA website to register. One community member suggested that when a hurricane is predicted, it would be helpful if FEMA or the local government could identify areas and locations in advance where they could get necessary resources and services, rather than wait until after the hurricane when there was no power and no access to communication sources such as news or radio. Some community members said they had to wait a week before they found out where the FEMA office was located.
- **FEMA Should Plan to Improve Communications About its Role in the Community -** Several community members asked about the relationship of FEMA with the military. They commented that FEMA should work closely with them since the military has transportation vehicles that can easily move around. FEMA should utilize their skills and capabilities to mobilize the military especially when communities could not get access to the island transportation system. (VITRAN PLUS)
- **FEMA Should Consider Persons with Disabilities When Making Local Hires for a Disasters to FEMA Jobs for People with**

Disabilities - A community member told us that after the hurricane FEMA had “an amazing amount of jobs” but that she was hearing repeatedly from people with disabilities that FEMA was not including people with disabilities in this employment effort. They were saying that employee have to work seven days a week, 12 hours a day, and there no negotiating. There was no possibility for a job unless you were going to work seven days a week for 12 hours a day. There were many people trying to survive, who needed a new place to live, or who had other problems associated with the hurricane who just needed a little extra income.

- **Consideration Should be Given to Alternatives to Meal Ready to Eat (MRE) Kits** - A community member told us that FEMA MREs are not something that could be eaten and they caused many stomach aches. She said you were able to get fresh food at distribution centers during previous hurricanes. However, this was not the case when it came to the distribution centers in St. Croix. MREs are listed as low sodium but when you looked at the sodium content on these MREs, they were not low sodium. She said they ate a few of them but could not continue to have them because it would cause a spike in their blood pressure.

E. Services and Support for Recovery

- **Sharing of Resources for Recovery** – Several community members reported that they helped neighbors by providing transportation to FEMA Disaster Recovery Centers (DRCs) and to grocery stores due to the public transportation system being down. Additionally debris on the road caused roads to be impassable. Community members told us stories of the kindness of friends and neighbors sharing groceries, water, flashlights and batteries, money for medications in the immediate hurricane aftermath. Some community members reported having to pay to use neighbors’ generators for asthma and CPAP machines. Several community members reported living alone, not in public housing and feeling isolated in terms of receiving news, resources, and no wellness checks from anyone.

III. Conclusion

CRCL and FEMA thanked participants for sharing concerns and what worked and encouraged participants to reach out after this meeting if they have additional concerns or questions that were not brought up during the session.

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