

COMMITTEE ON  
HOMELAND SECURITY, JUSTICE,  
AND PUBLIC SAFETY

**2024 Hurricane Season**

Presented By:

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Good day, Senator Kenneth Gittens, Chairperson of the Homeland Security, Justice and Public Safety Committee; committee members; all other senators in attendance today; all those seated in the senate chambers; as well as those in the listening and viewing audience. My name is Rueben Jennings and I am the Assistant Commissioner of the Department of Public Works (DPW). With me today to testify on the role the department plays in hurricane preparedness is Dodson James, Special Assistant to the Commissioner.

## **OVERVIEW**

The Department of Public Works plays a critical role in disaster preparedness. The testimony today will touch on the various areas DPW is preparing for the 2024 hurricane season, such as damage and structural assessments, gut clearing and stormwater management, sand and sandbag distribution, route clearance and infrastructure restoration. The department relies on both in-house personnel and contractors to perform the prescribed duties for pre-storm preparedness and post-event recovery.

Along with the Waste Management Authority, DPW manages the function of ESF-3 where the focus is route clearance, debris management and monitoring, and engineering support. DPW also supports several other emergency service functions as we perform mass movement (if needed) through the Division of Transportation, shelter preparation, and commodity distribution (if needed). Our engineering and operations staff actively participates in year-round trainings offered by the Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency (VITEMA), Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and other local and federal partners to ensure we are prepared in the unfortunate event of a natural disaster.

## **ENGINEERING SERVICES AND CONSTRUCTION MANAGEMENT**

Engineering and Construction Management is a vital part of our preparedness and recovery process. Our engineering team is responsible for performing preliminary and post-event damage assessments to the territory's infrastructure such as roads, bridges, and government buildings. In addition to determining the level of damage, our engineers are tasked with

verifying the structural safety of the territory's infrastructure, government buildings, and other resources. A report is then submitted to the Governor to assist in the determination of whether the territory qualifies for federal assistance.

## **DRAINAGE**

Every year, the department performs a stormwater drainage system assessment including all major guts, culverts, and swales. Based on this assessment, a schedule is devised to have them cleared prior to the height of hurricane season. The department has begun assessing the stormwater drainage system and will continue to do so throughout the hurricane season.

## **SAND DISTRIBUTION**

DPW is also responsible for sand distribution in the territory. Upon VITEMA's authorization, all government agencies are responsible for sending their staff - by appointment - to fill bags for their respective agencies. In addition to the sand and bags, DPW provides the necessary tools for filling. Pre-filled sandbags are reserved for senior citizens and physically challenged individuals.

We also partner with the VI Fire and Emergency Services to stage sand and sandbags distribution prior to any impending weather. At these locations, our dedicated firefighters and DPW staff assist residents with filling sandbags for personal use. Private residents are capped at six (6) sandbags per household and government agencies receive twenty-four (24) sandbags per department per district. Of course, this cap is adjusted for larger departments with more facilities.

## **ROUTE CLEARANCE**

Removing debris from all roadways in the territory is a DPW responsibility. This is carried out in accordance with priority routes and locations that have been identified by DPW and VITEMA. Said routes are subject to change as needed, however, priority is given to the territory's hospitals, ports, and other critical facilities. Route clearance involves pushing the

debris off the roadways and debris removal is collecting the debris from the roadside and transporting it to the approved Debris Management Sites (DMS). All aspects of the debris operation are completed following local and federal regulations.

Both districts have pre-approved contractors and in-house personnel assigned to certain sectors for immediate reconnaissance once an “all-clear” is issued. Equipment is typically pre-positioned to allow for rapid response and expedited route clearing, especially for priority routes and critical facilities.

## INFRASTRUCTURE RESTORATION

In preparation for the 2024 Hurricane Season, DPW has established the following protocol and preparation measures:

1. All DPW Operations personnel and Roadside Contractors are assigned to specific locations throughout the territory with a mandate to address all emergency agencies/locations first. When possible, we meet seventy-two hours before the impending natural disaster to review all assignments and protocols.
2. Once a Presidential Declaration has been made, emergency contractors join the process of roadside clearing and debris removal. They also address all high-priority locations first, which includes: all hospitals, fire departments, and police stations throughout the territory.
3. Emergency Contracts – DPW has contractors for the following:
  - a. Emergency Roadside Clearance
  - b. Emergency Debris Removal
  - c. Emergency Debris Monitors
  - d. Emergency Roof Repairs
  - e. DPW Emergency Generator Service & Maintenance
4. Engineering staff are assigned to inspect public buildings, bridges, and highways (based on priority locations). Based on the level of damage, structural

integrity, and priorities, contractors and in-house staff can be engaged to minimize/mitigate further damage and loss of property. Comprehensive reports are developed to be shared with both federal and local partners.