

Territory and Federal Partners Execute Evacuation Shelter Drill in a Pandemic Environment

Release Date: août 30, 2021

ST. CROIX, U.S. Virgin Islands – The winds and rains swirl as a Category 2 hurricane approaches the island and evacuees file out of the Virgin Islands Transit (VITRAN) bus and approach the D.C. Canegata Recreation Center to seek shelter. Many of the evacuees are exhausted, with loved ones left behind.

About 10 evacuees approach the entrance to the recreation center and urge the Virgin Islands National Guard soldiers they need to get into the shelter as the storm approaches St. Croix. One woman is worried about her husband's whereabouts, another woman raises concerns about being in a shelter with COVID-19 cases surging on the island and a man asks for food and water.

The evacuees are reassured by the Guard's soldiers, a Virgin Islands Police Department officer, representatives from the Virgin Islands Department of Human Services and American Red Cross. The men and women are pre-screened, take COVID-19 tests, get temperature checks, and are processed into the shelter.

Shelter workers announce protocols and say lights will go out at 10 p.m. Ultimately, all was OK. The evacuees were volunteers from the Virgin Islands Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD) and there was no approaching storm. Human Services and the Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency (VITEMA), through support of FEMA's planning and logistical resources, led a successful field shelter drill under blue skies.

The afternoon field drill was preceded in the morning by discussions on operating congregate shelters in disaster conditions, while in a COVID-19 pandemic environment. The Mass Care Evacuation Shelter drill's focus to validate the territory's capability of opening shelters, initial operations, and closing shelters in a pandemic environment had three objectives.



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- Validate the congregate shelter portions of the Mass Care Pandemic Implementation Plan Annex,
- Assess interagency coordination to support the roles and responsibilities critical in shelter operations during a COVID-19 environment and
- Identify potential safety, staffing and logistical challenges in shelter operations may arise during an all-hazards event in a pandemic.

Mark A. Walters, Coordinator for FEMA's U.S. Virgin Islands Caribbean Area Office, saw the challenges with the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to leverage federal resources to support the territory with planning the shelter drill. "Mass care is a critical emergency support function with disaster response. The surge in COVID-19 cases across the U.S. Virgin Islands and approaching peak of hurricane season makes it essential to rehearse response focus areas such as sheltering before storms develop. We will continue to stay alert and support the territory with preparedness and response throughout the hurricane season," said Walters.

Various scenarios were raised by exercise participants before the field drill related to evacuation shelter operations. Numerous topics were raised including:

- What to do if evacuees refuse screening for COVID-19,
- COVID-19 protocols for territorial agencies and volunteers who would support shelter operations,
- Availability of nurses and resources to support COVID-19 testing and evacuees who were diagnosed positive or showing coronavirus symptoms,
- The frequency of testing for evacuees, adequate staffing and availability of communications resources such as Spanish and Haitian-Creole translators and American Sign Language interpreters.

Human Services Commissioner Kimberley Causey-Gomez was appreciative of the numerous participants who supported the shelter exercise and said Mass Care operations take a whole community effort. "Our way of life has completely changed since the pandemic, and this includes our disaster preparedness and planning efforts for our Virgin Islands community. Our public message since the 2020 season has been to shelter-in-place with the support from your friends, family, neighbors, and faith-based organizations," said Commissioner Causey-Gomez.



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“It is equally important for DHS to be prepared through our Mass Care requirements to have a safe evacuation shelter to be used, hopefully as a last resort to our residents. We understand not everyone is able to shelter-in-place and this training and exercise helped us to continually work together as a team to provide safety and security to you when you need it the most,” said Commissioner Causey-Gomez.

“We are thankful for our partner agencies, as well as the FEMA team who were willing to assist in our endeavors for improvement. It is important to ensure you are prepared individually and as a family unit, please obtain all of your supplies (i.e. water, food, prescriptions, batteries, etcetera) needed now,” said Commissioner Causey-Gomez.

The exercise allowed participants to brainstorm concepts to keep COVID-19 outside shelters and develop plans to strengthen shelter operations across the U.S. Virgin Islands.

“We are in the height of the 2021 Atlantic hurricane season which runs from August 15 to October 15 and is known historically as having the greatest chance of hurricane formation. This drill emphasized the importance of adjusting our shelter opening procedures to now include COVID-19 testing and screening,” said VITEMA Director Daryl Jaschen. “These new measures add additional time to process individuals but are designed to reduce the chance of COVID-19 being brought into a shelter,” said Director Jaschen.

“With support from the American Red Cross, masks and social distancing are also enforced at shelters, which unfortunately reduces the number of individuals permitted in a shelter. Additionally, we developed and practiced procedures that provide actions in case someone exhibits COVID-19 symptoms or tests positive. These procedures would involve temporary quarantine, notifying the Department of Health, and arranging transportation to a non-congregate shelter,” said Director Jaschen.

“While we are emphasizing sheltering at home, with neighbors, and with friends, there may be occasions when the threat to the Territory is so great that Governor [Albert] Bryan will announce shelter openings. When that time comes, we are prepared to safely and effectively open shelters,” said Director Jaschen.



The concepts used in the exercise would relate to evacuation shelters as well on St. Thomas, St. John and Water Island. Besides Human Services, VITEMA, the American Red Cross, VITRAN, the Guard, VIPD, and VOAD, exercise participants included:

- The Virgin Islands Department of Health, the Virgin Islands Port Authority, the Virgin Islands Department of Justice and the Virgin Islands Department of Education.

As hurricane season approaches its peak, stay alert, review your family's emergency plans, and understand your planning may be different this year because of the need to protect yourself and others from COVID-19.

Discuss the [Department of Health's](#) latest guidance on COVID-19 and how it may affect your hurricane planning. Have enough supplies for your household, include medication, disinfectant supplies, masks and pet supplies in your disaster supply kit **for up to 10 days**.

Sign up for [Alert VI](#) to receive emergency information. [VITEMA's](#) alert system is available in English and Spanish and provides real-time notifications for up to five addresses within the U.S. Virgin Islands.





A volunteer acting as an evacuee checks in with the Virgin Islands National Guard during an evacuation shelter drill at D.C. Canegata Recreation Center on St. Croix. The drill focused on validating the territory's capability of opening shelters, initial operations, and closing shelters in a pandemic environment. FEMA/Eric Adams



A volunteer role playing an evacuee looks to register at the D.C. Canegata Recreation Center shelter during an evacuation shelter drill. Members of the Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster role played evacuees during the field exercise. FEMA/Eric Adams