

The St. Thomas Source

US Virgin Islands

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V.I. Non-Profits Struggle to Serve in the Wake of Devastating Storms



My Brothers Workshop pitched in to serve residents after hurricanes. (Kelsey Nowakowski photo)

Like other segments of the population, the V.I.'s non-profit community was hit hard by September's double hurricane hits, but charitable groups don't have the option of closing for business while they make repairs. A survey of a few of the many entities serving the

territory's most vulnerable found some of them up and running shortly after the storms – albeit limping – while others are struggling just to survive.

– American Cancer Society, St. Croix and St. Thomas Units Cancer Support VI

Charlene Kehoe, director of Cancer Support VI, had bad news and more bad news for the territory's cancer patients.

Current projections are that it will be years before the Charlotte Kimelman Cancer Center can be rebuilt. The privately sponsored facility was adjacent to the quasi-governmental Schneider Regional Medical Center on St. Thomas, and both buildings were badly damaged by Hurricane Irma Sept. 6. Even the lead-lined, concrete radiation room, where some staff took refuge during the storm, suffered a crack in its wall.

People who had been going to the center for chemotherapy or radiation treatments were evacuated to Puerto Rico shortly after Irma, but then Puerto Rico was devastated by Hurricane Maria.

“Now those patients are stuck in Puerto Rico,” Kehoe said.

The next closest medical option is Florida, but Florida, like other states, doesn’t accept V.I. Medicaid, so that means many of those effected have no way to pay for treatment.

“I’ve got patients asking me what to do,” Kehoe said. “I just don’t know what to tell those patients because there’s no answer. It’s like the floor was pulled out from under us.”

Cancer Support VI partners with the American Cancer Society’s V.I. units, but both the St. Thomas and St. Croix offices are closed because of hurricane damage, she said.

Last year Cancer Support VI gave out 447 grants totaling \$200,000 to Virgin Islands residents to help defray expenses related to cancer treatments. Some of that money went to pay for travel and hotel costs for Crucians traveling to St. Thomas to the Kimmelman Center. The organization can continue to help with travel costs, but it can’t pay for the actual cost of treatment. “That’s beyond what we can do,” Kehoe said.

“It’s dire,” she added. But she isn’t giving up. “I’ve got a call in to a consultant” to see if there is a way to get a stateside facility to accept V.I. Medicaid payments.

American Red Cross of the Virgin Islands

With disaster relief the primary mission of the Red Cross internationally, its response in the Virgin Islands has been focused on immediate aid to hurricane victims. According to the national website, in the USVI Red Cross “is supporting shelters, serving meals and snacks, and distributing relief supplies.” Almost 250 “Red Crossers” are in the field, working with volunteers and various community groups to distribute food, water, tarps and other emergency supplies throughout the islands. On St. John, it supported the Bethany Church shelter and also supplied meals in Cruz Bay and Coral Bay. On St. Croix, it is supporting shelters run by the Department of Human Services. The organization cites the following numbers for its V.I. relief efforts so far: 58,000 meals and snacks; 117,000 relief items; 3,100 health and mental health services.

According to the leader of one of the local groups with which Red Cross has partnered, Archie Jennings, the organization has committed to providing small generators to some disabled individuals for such basic needs as keeping insulin cool and charging batteries for wheelchairs and other assist items.

Catholic Charities of the Virgin Islands

Catholic Charities of the Virgin Islands continues to operate its Bethlehem House homeless shelter on St. Thomas, soup kitchens on St. Croix and St. Thomas and outreach services to the poor and homeless on all three of the main islands, despite damage to facilities and personal losses for staff.

Four of the bare-bones staff of about 20 employees are homeless thanks to Irma or Maria. Bethlehem House homeless shelter on St. Croix was so badly damaged it’s uninhabitable now, according to Andrea Shillingford, executive director.

The 21 clients who were at that shelter when Maria came calling were evacuated to a public disaster shelter before the storm struck, so no one was hurt. But CCVI is desperately seeking a place to house them when the

government closes the disaster shelters. The Catholic Diocese may repair its St. Croix retreat house – which was also damaged, but not as badly – and turn it into a shelter temporarily.

CCVI has benefited from its affiliation with the diocese and with other Catholic Charities groups. Immediately after Irma heavily damaged St. Thomas and St. John, Catholic Charities of San Juan sent four small generators and other supplies via helicopter to St. Thomas. With them, CCVI was able to power the shelter and soup kitchen. Catholic Charities USA has contributed \$150,000 so far, including \$20,000 worth of “gift cards” redeemable at local outlets for distribution to hurricane victims. And there is more help on the way in the form of technical and administrative assistance, Shillingford said.

Like many other non-profits, the agency has partnered with other community groups and with government agencies on projects. One of those is a mental health clinic open daily Monday through Friday at Bethlehem House St. Thomas.

Disability Rights Center Coalition

Several V.I. groups that serve people who are disabled have formed a loose coalition to address the special needs of their clients.

The Disability Rights Center of the Virgin Islands, the V.I. Developmentally Disabled Council, the Developmental Disabilities Center, University Center for Excellence for the Developmentally Disabled, the V.I. Deaf and Hard of Hearing Association, the Center for Independent Living, and the State Rehabilitation Council/Vocational Rehabilitation, have banded together in the effort, according to Archie Jennings, attorney for the Disability Rights Center and longtime advocate for the disabled.

The idea is to promote preparedness and to assess the special needs of the disabled in the wake of a disaster. FEMA made a presentation to the group just a few days before Maria struck.

The first rule is not to isolate yourself during a disaster, Jennings noted. Ride out the storm in a disaster shelter if need be. That doesn't always happen, so members formed a support group to check on one another after the storm. It proved to be a good idea.

One man who is deaf was found in a closet in his home, unaware that the storm was over. Another man who is blind was afraid to move after his home was ravaged because he knew that items, whose known positions enabled to maneuver, had been dislocated, disrupting the pattern.

The coalition work continues, now focusing on getting people signed up for help from FEMA. Located above the Delly Deck in Havensight on St. Thomas, the Disability Rights Center is undamaged and has electricity, so it is serving as headquarters. Meetings are held there from 9:30 a.m. to noon on Thursdays and from 1:30 p.m. until the end of the business day (depending on curfew hours) on Fridays.

"We're going to run that, until there's no more people applying," Jennings said.

He praised Rodney Garrott, FEMA's disability integration advisor, for his assistance in that effort and also lauded Rothwell Ahulau of the Red Cross, which has offered equipment for hurricane victims who are disabled.

My Brothers Workshop

Established to give training and jobs to at-risk youth, My Brothers Workshop has expanded its community service over the years and especially since the hurricanes hit the territory.

According to a statement from Jenny Hawkes, MBW served more than 6,000 meals in the first 11 days after Irma, converting its Café and Bakery on St. Thomas into a feeding program and partnering with other community groups in that effort.

Through a donation of plywood and two-by-fours from Alpine Securities, 183 Media and Brad's Deals, it distributed free precut materials for people to use to board up their homes after Irma and before Maria.

Hawkes said MBW also will work with St. Thomas Reformed Church "to start mobilizing our work force to go to predesignated areas to help remove debris and help people rebuild. Our facilities withstood both storms, but some of our work trucks are down due to storm damage. Once we have that in place, we will be ready to roll."

Salvation Army

Capt. Christa Bryan of the Salvation Army reported that while its two front buildings on St. Thomas survived Irma, it sustained major damage at the back of the facility and cannot operate its soup kitchen. Prior to the storm, the Salvation Army was serving about 100 to 120 free meals daily, Monday through Friday, in downtown Charlotte Amalie.

Since the storm, it has partnered with My Brothers Workshop and the St. Thomas Reform Church to continue to serve the clients who rely on the soup kitchen. The Salvation Army has supplied canned goods and other food stuffs and clothing to the effort.

Bryan said her knowledge of operations on St. Croix is very limited because there is no cell service between the two entities since Maria devastated St. Croix.

However, she was able to report that a three-person team from the Salvation Army stateside arrived earlier this week on St. Croix to assist with operations. They had been trying to get to the territory for a long time but were unable to get a commercial flight earlier.

V.I. Strong

A newly formed group, V.I. Strong has solicited donations via the internet. Susan Bishop, who said she offered herself as a contact for the group, called

it a “grass roots organization” and said it has brought in two containers with relief supplies such as canned food, generator parts and solar lamps and is planning a third shipment.