



**U.S. VIRGIN  
ISLANDS  
DEPARTMENT  
OF HUMAN  
SERVICES**

**KIMBERLEY CAUSEY-GOMEZ, MSW  
COMMISSIONER**

**HOUSE RULES  
COMMITTEE**

*Tuesday, 20 July 2021*

**REPRESENTATIVE  
JIM P. MCGOVERN, CHAIRMAN**

1 Good afternoon Representative Jim McGovern, Chairman of the House Rules Committee, other  
2 Committee members and Representatives, my esteemed colleagues from the other islands and  
3 Territories, the listening and viewing audience. My name is Kimberley Causey-Gomez, and I am  
4 the Commissioner of the Virgin Islands Department of Human Services (DHS). Thank you for the  
5 opportunity to appear before you today to testify on the importance of ensuring that everyone  
6 can afford and has access to nutritious food, they need to thrive each and every day. And most  
7 importantly, how collectively, we can end hunger now.

8  
9 What I have observed in my 30+ years in the career of social work and through my role as the  
10 Commissioner of Human Services in the U.S. Virgin Islands, in times of crisis, existing inequalities  
11 in access to federal benefits, employment, food and other needs intensify and become more  
12 visible. Those living in poverty and facing vulnerability feel it most, and their food insecurity  
13 increases. Low income, debt, unemployment, disability, homelessness, food price increases, age,  
14 and environment all can play a role. In addition, food insecurity is experienced differently across  
15 race and ethnicity identities. The COVID19 Pandemic has only intensified this need.

16  
17 The goal of ending hunger in America should be inclusive and I am encouraged that the Virgin  
18 Islands is at the table to talk about how our needs may be similar to other places in the world,  
19 but also emphasizing there are a few challenges we may experience differently. We are unique  
20 because although we are one Territory, we have four separate islands in which you must either  
21 take an airplane or boat to get to each one. We do not have the comfort or access in evacuating  
22 to another state or territory in times of disaster, like hurricanes or earthquakes. In 2017, the Virgin  
23 Islands experienced, not one but two Category 5 hurricanes within a matter of two weeks.  
24 Disaster recovery is long-term and not a simple overnight fix of not only our infrastructure of  
25 buildings but our homes of our people. We still have a lot of "blue roofs", which means people

26 were not able to afford to repair their homes and therefore they still have a tarp on it. In order  
27 to obtain sustainable food and commodities, most everything must be shipped or flown in daily,  
28 weekly, or monthly. This added cost of shipping is then added to the consumer. If we did not  
29 have some of our federal programs, like Head Start, SNAP or Meals on Wheels, people would be  
30 hungry.

31

32 DHS is entrusted to serving our most vulnerable populations throughout the Territory. Our  
33 ultimate goal is to assist our constituents, from our littlest people to our oldest, in achieving self-  
34 sufficiency through one or more of the 80+ programs and services we offer. The VI has a  
35 population of approximately 104,000 people. Although the numbers of people we serve varies  
36 by program, our Medicaid Program alone currently serves 33,561 members, which is 31% of the  
37 population of the VI. Our Head Start Program continued to provide nutritious meals and snacks  
38 for our students. We increased our Meals on Wheels services to serve more seniors through  
39 Pandemic federal funds. In fiscal year 2021, 26,776 individuals (39% of the VI population). DHS  
40 has completed two rounds of issuance of the Pandemic Electronic Benefits Transfer (PEBT) and  
41 began issuing the third round of benefits this month.

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43 The hunger crisis varies in our Nation and each individual community is affected differently. If  
44 food alone were the answer to this crisis, we probably would have solved it by now. I think it is a  
45 bigger, broader solution that involves the food system from start to finish. To making sure people  
46 have access and that they can afford the food. I believe it ties into poverty. I do not know if we  
47 can solve one without solving the other. The second part is much more complex as we would  
48 need to target the root causes of generational poverty and break that cycle.

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50 The Virgin Islands government faces many challenges ahead. It is a balancing act to address the  
51 toll on major industries like tourism, navigate limited fiscal revenues, supporting increasing  
52 needs due to loss of livelihoods, all while managing a COVID-19 response that protects the  
53 health, safety, and the wealth of the community. The availability of vaccines represents a positive  
54 development in the fight against the spread of the virus with hopes of a return to a sense of  
55 normalcy.

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57 As a proud mother to active-duty U.S. Marine Corps Lance Corporal Antonio Gomez and to  
58 college student Gabriella Gomez, as well as the Commissioner of the Virgin Islands Department  
59 of Human Services, I am continually inspired by our community members and agencies who are  
60 doing amazing work, especially during the pandemic. I am truly thankful to our federal partner  
61 agencies who continue to support the efforts in the U.S. Virgin Islands. I also extend gratitude to  
62 our dedicated Virgin Islands Department of Human Services team of professionals, the continued  
63 support of Governor Albert Bryan, Jr. and Lieutenant Governor Tregenza Roach as DHS continues  
64 to be committed to our motto, ***“Working Together to Make a Difference”***. And thank you,  
65 Chairman McGovern for making this effort to identify solutions to decrease food insecurity a  
66 priority.