

UNITED STATES VIRGIN ISLANDS HOUSING FINANCE AUTHORITY

CITIZEN PARTICIPTION PLAN

Summary

September 3, 2020



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Overview

The United States Virgin Islands (“U.S. Virgin Islands,” “USVI,” or “Territory”) receives annual allocations from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (“HUD”) for the four block grant programs. The Virgin Islands Housing Finance Authority (“VIHFA”) is the Territory’s lead agency for the HUD-funded programs.

These programs provide funding for activities that create or rehabilitate affordable housing; provide services and housing for persons who are homeless and other vulnerable populations; and provide decent housing, a suitable living environment and expanded economic opportunities, predominately for low- and moderate-income residents.

VIHFA, as the HUD grantee, is required to solicit input from the public and to submit to HUD a Consolidated Plan that covers how the funds will be used over a five (5) year period. The solicitation of feedback from the public is specifically required for those groups of the population the funding is intended to benefit. VIHFA must submit an Annual Action Plan each of the five years showing the progress made for that year of the Consolidated Plan.

Programs Included in the Consolidated Plan

Community Development Block Grant Program

The primary objective of the Community Development Block Grant (“CDBG”) is the development of viable urban communities by providing decent housing and a suitable living environment and expanding economic opportunities primarily for persons of low and moderate income. Not less than 70% of CDBG funds received shall be used for activities that benefit low to moderate income persons. Funds may also be used for elimination of slums and blight or for activities that address an urgent need.

The Territory of the U.S. Virgin Islands became eligible to participate in the national CDBG program in 1976. The greater portion of the CDBG funds has been sub-granted to various non-profit and governmental entities.

Emergency Solutions Grant Program

The Emergency Solutions Grant (“ESG”) Program provides grants for the rehabilitation or conversion of buildings for use as emergency shelters for the homeless and for the payment of certain related operating and social services expenses. Limited funds from each annual grant may be used for homeless prevention activities and essential services for the target population. The Territory became eligible to receive ESG funds in 1997.

HOME Investment Partnership Program

The Home Investments Partnership Program (“HOME”) is a HUD formula-allocation grant through which funds are provided to jurisdictions to support state and local affordable housing programs. The primary objective of the HOME Program is to expand the supply of safe, decent,

sanitary and affordable housing for low-income families. Funds may be used for acquisition, rehabilitation and new construction of housing and for tenant-based rental assistance. The Virgin Islands became eligible to participate in the HOME Program in 1993.

Housing Trust Fund Program

The Housing Trust Fund (“HTF”) Program was established under Title 1 of the Housing and Economic Recovery Act of 2008, Section 1131 (Public Law 110-289), known as “HERA.” The HTF Program is an affordable housing production program that complements existing federal and Territorial efforts to increase and preserve the supply of decent, safe, and sanitary affordable housing for extremely low- and very low-income households, including homeless families. HTF funds may be used for the production or preservation of affordable housing through the acquisition, new construction, reconstruction, and/or rehabilitation of non-luxury housing with suitable amenities.

These programs allow the Territory to carry out a wide range of activities including the creation of affordable housing opportunities, rehabilitation of housing, job opportunities through economic development, improved community facilities and infrastructure, public services, and homeless housing and services.

Programs Not Included in the Consolidated Plan

CDBG Disaster Recovery (“CDBG-DR”) and CDBG Mitigation (“CDBG-MIT”)

When the U. S. Congress allocates disaster recovery funds, HUD provides flexible grants to impacted governmental entities to recover from Presidentially declared disasters, especially in low-income areas. Disaster recovery funds do not fall under the typical annual allocation programs HUD administers, since these funds are the result of specific disaster recovery Congressional allocations to the Community Development Block Grant program.

CDBG-DR funds are allocated to fund recovery and rebuilding activities and address the impacts of the disaster, requiring a documented tie to the storm. CDBG-MIT funds are allocated to fund activities and projects that will have a long-lasting impact on a community by reducing or eliminating repetitive losses of property and critical infrastructure, decreasing future disaster costs.

To date, HUD has allocated the U. S. Virgin Islands a total of \$1,849,677,884 in disaster recovery funding; \$1,075,489,884 in CDBG-DR and \$774, 188,000 CDBG-MIT to assist in the recovery and rebuilding efforts resulting from Hurricanes Irma and Maria.

Citizen Participation Plan

Purpose

The U.S. Code of Federal Regulations (“CFR”) at 24 CFR 91 Subpart B (“Subpart B”), and program regulations at 24 CFR Part 576 and 24 CFR Part 570.441 require that the Territory

develop and follow a detailed citizen participation plan that provides opportunities for and encourages citizen involvement. The citizen participation plan (“CPP”) must be made public.

The Citizen Participation Plan describes how the Territory will provide for and encourage citizen participation in the development plans for the use of the HUD funds including the five-year Consolidated Plan, Annual Action Plans, the Consolidated Annual Performance and Evaluation Reports, and any substantial amendments to those plans or reports.

Since citizen participation requirements apply whenever the Territory receives special HUD funding allocations or awards, such as CDBG-DR or CDBG-MIT, the CPP outlines how VIHFA will comply with the waivers and/or additional requirements as outlined in the awarding Federal Register Notices and HUD grant agreements.

Process for Changes to the Citizen Participation Plan

If revisions are needed, the following process will be followed.

1. A draft of the original Citizen Participation Plan will be advertised with a public review and comment period
2. The final Citizen Participation Plan will be made available
3. A copy of the plan will also be posted on the Virgin Islands Housing Finance Authority website (www.vihfa.gov) in both English and Spanish, and will be made available in a format accessible to persons with disabilities
4. All advertisements relative to the availability of the Final Draft Plan for public review will be posted on the VIHFA website, the VI Source (www.visource.com), and published in the *Virgin Islands Daily News* and the *St. Croix Avis*

The Citizen Participation Plan can be changed only after:

1. The public has been notified of the intent to modify it,
2. The public has had a thirty (30)-day period to review and comment on any proposed changes,
3. The Virgin Island Housing Finance Authority Board of Directors has approved and adopted the proposed changes, and
4. HUD has reviewed and approved the modified Citizen Participation Plan.

The Citizen Participation Plan must be adopted by the VIHFA Board of Directors. Once approved by HUD, the Citizen Participation Plan will be effective until it is amended or otherwise replaced.

Continuity Protocols for Emergency Situations, Including but not Limited to Public Health and/or Safety

Unexpected circumstances such as the 2020 Novel Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Outbreak National Emergency may arise that prevent the implementation of the Citizen Participation Plan policies as outlined, restricting the number of citizens that can congregate, eliminating the ability to hold public hearings. Alternative citizen participation methods will allow the public engagement requirements to be carried out and a continuity for the programs to be implemented during difficult times.

All public outreach strategies run the risk of not reaching the most vulnerable segments of a community. Considerations of conditions that may present challenges for participating in public outreach efforts are:

- Geographic isolation of vulnerable individuals;
- Linguistic and/or cultural isolation of immigrant populations;
- Homeless or those at-risk of becoming homeless;
- Access to methods of participating in outreach efforts
- Ensuring the outreach plan reaches the target populations, based on programs
- Low stakeholder involvement

The goal of the VIHFA Citizen Participation Plan is to ensure the efforts result in meaningful and successful engagement. The use of online engagement through a variety of social media platforms provides the ability to provide and seek information.

The use of social media allows VIHFA to:

- Facilitate the dissemination of information to the Territory;
- Solicit and obtain feedback from the public;
- Meet and manage public expectations;
- Engage the community in problem solving; and
- Provide program updates and information

Strategies for providing information and soliciting public comments can include (but may not be limited to):

1. Digital “townhall” meetings with recorded presentations and write/call in questions capabilities
2. Leveraging public access television and radio
3. Social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)
4. Livestreaming
5. Coordinated website postings (VIHFA, GVI agencies and departments)

The use of social media provides a mechanism to collaborate among the community, providers, stakeholders and other agencies. Social media provides individuals a voice and empowers them

to participate in their own community as a whole. VIHFA, as leaders of the programs, are able to provide guidance, ask for and accept feedback, and ensure accuracy of information that is shared, providing transparency and accountability.

Consolidated Plan, Annual Action Plan, and Consolidated Annual Performance and Evaluation Report

HUD created the Consolidated Plan process to ensure communities undertake comprehensive housing affordability and community development planning strategies for all grant funds in a manner that involves the residents that will benefit from the programs developed by these funds.

Consolidated Plan

The Consolidated Plan, built on citizen participation, is the document that outlines the Territory's multi-year goals and priorities. The Consolidated Plan then serves as the application and strategic implementation plan for the HUD program funds, as well as a basis for assessing the Territory's performance of the stated goals and priorities.

Annual Action Plan

The Annual Action Plan is the document that provides a concise summary of the actions, activities, and the specific federal and non-federal resources that will be used each year to address the priority needs and specific goals identified by the Consolidated Plan. The Annual Action Plan includes VIHFA's method for distributing funds to entities and non-profit organizations, and the geographic areas of the Territory where assistance will be used.

Consolidated Annual Performance and Evaluation Report

The Consolidated Annual Performance and Evaluation Report (CAPER) as the mechanism to describe the accomplishments of each project and activity undertaken during the previous fiscal year, including how and to what extent the funds were used for activities that benefited low- and moderate-income residents.

The **Annual Action Plan** and **CAPER** provide detailed financial and beneficiary information, explaining to the public and HUD how VIHFA is carrying out its housing and community development strategies, projects, and activities.

Special Programs Not Included in HUD'S Annual Formula Allocations

Subject to availability of supplemental funding appropriated by the U.S. Congress, HUD provides flexible grants to impacted governmental entities to recover from Presidentially declared disasters, especially in low-income areas. When Congress appropriates additional funding for the CDBG Program as Disaster Recovery or Mitigation funds, HUD issues a Federal Register Notice to outline the waivers and/or alternative requirements associated with the specific allocations.

In the wake of the two category five Hurricanes that hit the U.S. Virgin Islands in September 2017, the Territory received \$1.86billion to assist in recovery and rebuilding efforts resulting from Hurricanes Irma and Maria.

CDBG-DR Action Plan and Amendment(s)

Federal Register Notices allocating disaster recovery/mitigation funds contain any waivers and/or additional requirements and waivers associated with the awarded CDBG-DR or CDBG-MIT funds, including the requirement for an Action Plan for the use of the disaster recovery or mitigation funds.

The disaster recovery and mitigation Action Plan process follows the development of the Consolidated Plan, in addition to any requirements or waivers the awarding Federal Register(s) may contain. This includes the submission of the Action Plan to HUD for approval and making the approved Action Plan available on the VIHFA Disaster Recovery website at www.vihfa.gov/disaster-recovery. The disaster recovery/mitigation Action Plan and any substantial amendments must be developed with citizen participation.

The CDBG-MIT Program has increased public participation requirements, including:

1. Public comment period must be a minimum of 45 days,
2. At least three (3) public hearings, one which must occur prior to the public comment period for the Action plan, and 2 during the comment period, and
3. The creation of Citizen Advisory Committee with a minimum number of meetings to provide on-going public input into mitigation activities

Citizen Advisory Committee

CDBG-MIT funding requires the formation of a Citizen Advisory Committee which will meet at least twice per year (every six months) throughout the implementation of the CDBG- MIT program. The Citizen Advisory Committee's first meeting is to be held after the submission of the CDBG-MIT Action Plan (but prior to HUD's approval) and serve as an ongoing public forum to provide transparency and inform decision making throughout the CDBG- MIT program.

Additional Requirements for Special Funding Programs

Because the special funding programs are not a part of HUD's annual formula allocations there are additional requirements associated to the reporting, tracking, monitoring and compliance of the programs.

Citizen Complaints

VIHFA must respond to every citizen complaint received within 15 working days of receipt of the complaint. Complaints may be received via US mail, email, or in person. All complaints must be addressed. If complaints are received regarding fraud, waste or abuse, those complaints should be

forwarded to HUD's Office of Investigator General Fraud Hotline at (800) 347-3735 and hotline@hudoig.gov.

Public Website

All CDBG-DR and CDBG-MIT grantees are required to maintain a public website that is easy to navigate from the homepage. The CDBG-MIT website must be updated at monthly and must provide information regarding how the CDBG-MIT funds will be used, managed and administered. This includes the method for distributing the CDBG-MIT funds, who is eligible to apply, what the application process is, what the eligible activities are, the deadlines and requirements for applying for funding.

Also required on the CDBG-MIT website are:

1. Action Plan, along with any amendments clearly numbered and dated
2. Quarterly Progress Reports
3. Procurement policies and procedures
4. All executed contracts paid with CDBG-MIT funds
5. Identification of any goods currently being procured

Communications Regarding Citizen Participation Plan

All communication regarding the Citizen Participation Plan, comments, complaints, reasonable accommodation for persons with disabilities, translation services, or other elements shall be directed to the Communications Manager of the Virgin Islands Housing Finance Authority at:

St. Thomas Office (340) 777-4432
VIHFA
Attention: Communications Manager
3202 Demarara Plaza, Suite 200
St. Thomas, VI 00802-6447

St. Croix Office (340) 772-4432
VIHFA
Attention: Communications Manager
100 Lagoon Complex, Suite 4
Frederiksted, St. Croix 00840-4002

The comment period on the Citizen Participation Plan will be open as of September 3, 2020. Comments must be received no later than October 3, 2020 at 11:59pm (EST).

The **public meeting** for the Citizen Participation Plan will be conducted via Zoom, with the dates and times announced in the public outreach campaign through radio, print and online announcements outlined below.

Public outreach included:

Radio announcements

60 second ads will run September 3 through September 26, 2020 to announce the virtual meetings. Station information for each market includes:

St. Croix

- WJKC Communications (Isle 95, 95.1 FM; Sunny 99.5 FM; Caribbean Country, 93.5 FM; Rumba 98.3 FM)
- The Reef Broadcasting (103.5 FM; 1620 AM)
- Caledonia Communications (WSTX AM 970; 100.3 FM)

St. Thomas

- Da Vybe 107.9 FM
- Ackley Media Group (Hot 105.3 FM; AM 1000)
- Lucky 13 Radio (WSTA AM 1340)

Print announcements

VIHFA published announcements of the virtual meetings to solicit public comment and recommendations on September 5 and September 14, 2020 in the *Virgin Islands Daily News* and the *St. Croix Avis* newspapers.

Online announcements

Between September 3 and October 3, 2020 announcements of the virtual meetings and solicitation of public comment and recommendations were posted on the *Virgin Islands Consortium*, the *Virgin Islands Source* (the Virgin Islands Source has 3 sites; *St. Croix*, *St. Thomas* and *St. John Source*) websites.