GOVERNMENT OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

STATEMENT

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Statement: Ongoing Reforms to the Public Assistance Programme

Release Date: 23 January, 2026



STATEMENT BY THE HONOURABLE VINCENT O. WHEATLEY

MINISTER FOR HEALTH AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

AT THE SECOND SITTING OF THE THIRD SESSION OF THE FIFTH

HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

THURSDAY, 15th JANUARY, 2026

Ongoing Reforms to the Public Assistance Programme

Madam Speaker, I rise to provide this Honourable House with an update on the status of the Public Assistance Programme and the Ministry of Health and Social Development's ongoing work to modernise social assistance in The Virgin Islands, as we continue to strengthen support for individuals and families who need it most.

Madam Speaker, Public Assistance remains a vital safety net, particularly for seniors, persons with disabilities, and households facing serious hardship. While the Programme is already operating under a reformed framework, the Ministry's priority is to ensure that assistance is delivered consistently and fairly, with clear rules, proper documentation, and service standards that the public can trust.

Honourable Members would recall that as an interim measure, Cabinet approved updated monthly Public Assistance grant amounts on 5th February 2025, pending the full benefit structure under the revised framework. These increases took effect from 28th February 2025 and were applied to all eligible existing beneficiaries.

Since implementation, the impact has been clear! In 2025, the updated grants benefited more than 500 recipients, representing a **13 percent** increase in the number of persons served and a **16 percent increase** in total programme disbursements, when compared to 2024.

By way of example, **188 elderly persons** received support totalling more than $569,000, alongside other targeted provisions such as disability supplements, home care assistance, and medical grants.

Madam Speaker, this decision was not an accounting exercise, it was direct relief! It helped beneficiaries manage basic needs during a period of rising costs, while the Ministry continued the deeper work of strengthening and modernising the

Programme.

Madam Speaker, to support orderly implementation and build lasting capacity, the Ministry engaged a consultant to support the Public Assistance Programme's Implementation under the amended legislative framework.

The Public Assistance Programme has grown in scope and complexity, particularly following the consolidation of previously fragmented discretionary grants into a single, more transparent system. While this consolidation strengthened governance and accountability, it also increased the volume and complexity of applications now managed by the Social Assistance Division.

While staff have continued to work diligently, it was identified that many day-to-day processes were still shaped by legacy procedures and terminology that predate the current framework. Left unaddressed, this creates inconsistency, operational inefficiency, and unnecessary vulnerability to appeals.

For that reason, the consultancy was deliberately designed as a 24-week, phased programme, focused on addressing these gaps in a practical and sustainable way, so that improvements remain in place after the consultant's assignment ends

Madam Speaker, it is important for the public to understand that this is not reform in theory. It is reform in practice, affecting how assistance is assessed, decided, documented, and reviewed.

Work is progressing in parallel across the areas that most directly affect service quality, including:

- the documentation of standard operating procedures and practical tools, so staff are not forced to improvise and decisions are applied consistently
- appeals-ready decision-making, with clearer written reasons and stronger file quality, aligned with enhanced procedural safeguards
- strengthened data protection and confidentiality practices, to safeguard personal information and build public confidence
- improved digitisation readiness, reducing reliance on manual processes and improving timeliness, reporting, and customer service

- more structured verification and inter-agency coordination, to ensure eligibility checks are fair, lawful, and effective.

Madam Speaker, these changes make the Programme more reliable for beneficiaries and more manageable for the staff who administer it.

Madam Speaker, Public Assistance reform is part of a broader national direction. The Virgin Islands requires a social protection system that is easier to understand, easier to administer, and better able to respond to both long-term hardship and sudden shocks.

That is why the Ministry is continuing work, in stages, towards the development of a broader Social Protection Bill.

This Bill is intended to replace the existing Public Assistance Act and establish a modern legislative framework for social assistance and wider social protection. It is expected to strengthen governance and cross-government coordination, establish a dedicated Social Protection Fund, and introduce a Single Register supported by a Social Protection Information Management System.

The experience gained from implementing the reformed Public Assistance Programme, including the operational lessons now being captured through the current consultancy, will directly inform this wider legislative effort and help ensure it is practical, implementable, and supported by the systems and staffing required to deliver.

Madam Speaker, the work underway reflects this Government’s continued commitment to investing in people, particularly those who are most vulnerable.

Public Assistance is not a static programme; it is a living system that must evolve with the needs of our community. Through increased grant support, improved systems, strengthened oversight, and targeted capacity building, the Ministry is ensuring that assistance reaches those who need it in a manner that is fair, dignified, and accountable.

At the same time, we are laying the groundwork for a stronger and more resilient social protection framework, one that protects the most vulnerable today, while

preparing the Territory to respond more effectively to future challenges.

Madam Speaker, this is responsible governance. It is compassionate governance. And it reflects our determination to ensure that no one in The Virgin Islands is left behind.

Madam Speaker, I thank you.

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Additional Documents or Media

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