



Providing affordable housing for the virgin islands



## The Virgin Islands Housing Authority

## Providing affordable housing for the virgin islands

The Virgin Islands Housing Authority (VIHA) is a public housing corporation that operates under the provisions of the U.S. Housing Act of 1937, as amended, the Quality Housing and Work Responsibility Act of 1998, and the Virgin Islands Code. The birth of VIHA

dates back to 1941, when the municipal councils of both St. Thomas/St. John and St. Croix passed an ordinance creating municipal housing authorities in a single agency, the Virgin Islands Housing and Redevelopment Authority (VIHRA), with tri-island jurisdiction.



In 1962, Act No. 903 of the Virgin Islands Legislature established the agency as the Virgin Islands Housing Authority.

VIHA is empowered with the responsibility for planning, financing, constructing, maintaining, and managing public housing developments on the islands of St. Croix and St.Thomas. Its mission statement is as follows: "To create vibrant, dynamic, sustainable communities so families can evolve economically, and to improve lives and strengthen communities through quality, safe, and affordable housing and by providing a myriad of services to empower public housing residents."

## **AT A GLANCE**

**WHO:** The Virgin Islands Housing Authority

**WHAT:** A public housing corporation that is responsible for planning, constructing, and maintaining public housing in the U.S. Virgin Islands

WHERE: St. Thomas and St. John, U.S. V.I.

WEBSITE: www.vihousing.org

Robert Graham, VIHA's Managing Director, talks about the agency's past, present, and future initiatives: "In the 1950s, the Territory sought to reduce rural slums and, in that process, to build public housing to provide affordable housing for residents and reduce the reliance on slum dwellings. So it began a series of acquisitions and development of properties and requested HUD (The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development) to designate them as public housing, so that they would be eligible for operating subsidies as well as capital improvement subsidies."

By the early 1970s, Graham says that the number of VIHA units had reached a total of 4,127 apartments in approximately 35 developments across the two islands. "That was the largest number of units that the Housing Authority owned and managed," he continues. "Subsequently, in the late '80s and '90s, a series of hurricanes destroyed a great deal of property in the Territory, including some public housing developments. And so, the Housing Authority had to demolish a number of them. And that took the number down to approximately 3,300 units – about 25 percent of the inventory. So, currently, we manage 3,287 units in 27 developments."



While the Government of the Virgin Islands is obligated to provide municipal services such as schools, police and fire protection, garbage collection, road and street light maintenance, and water to the residents of public housing, VIHA's main service to its residents is to administer the three main programs by which HUD funds affordable housing in the U.S. and its Territories: Public Housing, Housing Choice Vouchers, and Section 8 Assistance.

Public Housing was established to provide decent and safe rental housing for eligible low-income families, the elderly, and persons with disabilities. Public housing comes in all sizes and types from efficiencies, to scattered single family houses, to high rise apartments, to one-bedroom units for the elderly. There are approximately 1.2 million households living in public housing units in the U.S., managed by some 3,300 Housing Authorities (HAs). HUD administers federal aid to local HAs which manage the housing for low-

income residents at rents they can afford.

While Public Housing Funds go to the individual HAs, both for capital improvements and for their day-to-day operations, Housing Choice Vouchers are a form of monetary assistance that go to very low-income individuals and families so that they can rent, lease, or purchase safe, decent, and affordable privately-owned housing. Finally, HUD also provides what is known as Section 8 Assistance for Public Housing Relocation/ Replacement. Section 8 vouchers can be allocated to public housing tenants who are forced to move because of the rehabilitation or demolition of their public housing unit, allowing them to relocate into privatelyowned housing and still pay affordable rent. This assistance helps make the demolition of obsolete public housing projects possible, while supporting displaced residents.

The VIHA's challenge is trying to keep up with the de-

mand for public housing assistance - the waiting list for housing is about 800; the waiting list for vouchers is about 2,000 - while concurrently maintaining its aging housing stock and building new developments - all within its budgetary constraints. "Most of our developments are 50 or 60 years old," says Graham. "And our physical needs assessment for those 3000 plus units is over \$200 million. We receive approximately \$5 million in capital funding each year. So, it's not much money to repair everything at one time."

Graham explains that one way for the agency to meet its challenge is to "right-size" its housing inventory. Currently, VIHA has approximately 800 vacant units, so it is acting to remove between five and six hundred of them; 325 units in two different projects are presently being demolished, and another several hundred are awaiting HUD approval for their demolition. "We're right-sizing the public housing inventory by taking out







the obsolete developments and building viable replacement developments to ensure that we have desirable, state-of-the-art housing with a useful life of 40 years," he says. "When we right-size, we will reduce at least 500 units of the 800 vacant units, and in some cases we will receive replacement vouchers for what we are currently demolishing. So we are reducing the number of public housing but we're replacing that number with new developments and an increase in the number of vouchers, where possible."

One of VIHA's newest developments is the Louis E. Brown public housing development, the largest redevelopment effort ever undertaken by the agency. The first two phases - 102 family units and 40 senior villas - have been completed and Graham says that negotiations are ongoing with a developer for Phase III. Ultimately, the plan is to have a total of 224 one- to three-bedroom units for families and seniors. And in an effort to reduce its residents' utility bills, the prop-

erties come equipped with solar lighting, solar thermal water heaters, energy efficient appliances, and rainfall cisterns. "That development is very, very attractive. It is, in my estimation, the best-looking and bestdesigned development on St. Croix," Graham exults. "Many residents feel that way, as well, because our public housing waiting list for 1,200 older public housing is 800; the waiting list for this development is at least twice that. So, the demand is for new, affordable, attractive housing."

Like many other HAs, VIHA offers its public housing residents other services including educational opportunities, job training and employment programs, and support programs for the elderly, as well as home ownership programs for qualified families. "We have a home ownership program in one development where we're selling to current residents single-family, one to three bedroom units, as is. Graham says. "They have some deterioration, but we will repair them so they





## Executive Insurance Services, inc.

Home · Commercial · Auto · Life · Health

RR 2, Box 10566 · The Village Mall No. 4 · Kingshill, VI 00850-9813 · Tel.: 340-773-6412 · Fax: 340-713-8512 · website: eisvi.com

"Because You Deserve Executive Service"

Whether you need insurance for yourself, your small business or your Fortune 500 company, we can help you.

As Coverholders for Underwriters' At Lloyd's, London and representatives of other leading insurers, we can provide competitive and creative solutions for all your insurance requirements, not only in the United States Virgin Islands, but throughout the Caribbean.

- Auto Insurance
- Commercial Property Insurance
- Health Insurance
- Home Insurance

- Liability Insurance
- Life Insurance
- Professional Liability Insurance
- Pollution Liability Insurance

We are one of the United States Virgin Islands' largest agencies, now in our 18th year of operations. Our employees take pride in providing professional service to all. Please give us a call, stop by or visit our website. We would appreciate the opportunity to be of service to you.

Tel.: 340-773-6412 • website: eisvi.com



meet code and we will provide a one-year warranty. We'll sell a unit to residents who can qualify for a mort-gage, for between 22 and 27 thousand dollars - which is a bargain anywhere on the planet."

Looking ahead, Graham lays out VIHA's long-term goals: "We would like to build 1,000 new, affordable housing apartments in the next eight to ten years. That's 75 – 100 units, on average, a year," he says. And then he enumerates the main objectives outlined in the agency's five-year plan: "To provide homeless and emergency housing; increase independent, senior housing; create housing opportunities for young professionals; encourage home ownership; right-size public housing portfolio; incorporate sustainable and

resilient affordable housing development strategies (putting in solar panels, putting in cisterns, reducing our cost of utilities for the new developments); and utilizing the White House's Choice Neighborhoods Initiative model." (The Choice Neighborhoods program supports locally driven strategies to address struggling neighborhoods with distressed public or HUD-assisted housing through a comprehensive approach to neighborhood transformation. The program is designed to catalyze critical improvements in neighborhood assets, including vacant property, housing, services and schools.)

Graham stresses that VIHA is "sound, both financially and operationally, effective and efficient in terms of

operations, and in the forefront of providing affordable housing in the Territory." It is right-sizing its inventory, demolishing obsolete structures, building new and affordable units to meet the islands' demand, providing increasing services for its residents, and advocating home ownership for residents who are moving toward self-sufficiency. "We are comparable to any large Housing Authority in the States," he states. "We are pleased with the progressions that we have made thus far, and will aggressively continue to strive forward."

PREFERRED VENDORS

Do Right Construction, Inc. - doright09@live.com

**Executive Insurance Services, Inc.** - Executive Insurance Services, Inc. (EIS) was established in 1997 by Lance P. Chardon, its current President and C.E.O. EIS is mainly a retail insurance agency and holds all insur-

ance licenses as required by the V.I. Insurance Department to include Resident Agent, Resident Broker, and Surplus Lines Broker licenses. The agency is capable of servicing Automobile, Homeowners, Commercial Property, General Liability, and Professional Liability insurance for its clients. - www.eisvi.com

**Do Right Construction Inc.** - Founded in 1997, Do Right Construction Inc. is a small, nonresidential construction company, providing industrial buildings and warehouses in St. Thomas, Virgin Islands. It has 9 full time employees and generates an estimated \$730,000 in annual revenue. - doright09@live.com

Pittsburgh Paints - www.ppg.com

**Dudley Rich Davis LLP** - www.dudleylaw.com





Dudley Rich Davis LLP offers an array of specialties which bring solid expertise to an array of local and international clients.

Our mission is to provide consistently superior legal advice in litigation, commercial transactions, real estate, government compliance, mediation and arbitration in a timely and cost effective way.

34- 35 Dronningens Gade, Suites 2A &2B (at Hibiscus Alley) St. Thomas, U.S. V. I. 00802 | Phone: 340-776-7474 Fax: 340-776-8044 | info@dudleylaw.com



