

Statement for the Record

House Oversight Committee

Re: Hurricanes Irma & Maria, and the ensuing response in the USVI

My name is Meaghan Enright, and I've been invited to submit a statement for the record for the hearings on the historic 2017 hurricane season and its impact on the U.S. Virgin Islands. I'm a 12 year resident of St John, and over the past six months have worked with Love City Strong and the Love for Love City Foundation on the recovery efforts on St John.

From the moment Irma formed off the coast of Africa, as a Cape Verde system, on the 30th of August, everyone was watching her. Something felt different about this storm, and so she was monitored carefully despite being thousands of miles away. As she drew closer, she underwent rapid intensification on the 4th, going from a Category 2 to a Category 5 by 5th of September and the Territory was on high alert for a direct hit by the storm.

Growing up in Virginia and North Carolina, and spending more than a decade in the USVI, I've experienced hurricanes of varying intensities. I was concerned, because this was an unusually strong storm, but felt confident we could ride it out. My apartment on St John is essentially a bunker, the lower level of a concrete home with an unfinished second level - my roof is the concrete floor of the planned upper unit. We're set below the crest of a hill, in a narrow bay, south facing but largely protected, and high enough to be clear of even the most impressive storm surge. And yet, I had no idea what we were in for. Fortunately, Irma passed through the Territory in the daylight hours of the 6th of September. Had she passed at night, the casualty numbers for the Territory would certainly have been different.

One of the anomalies of Irma's track was the tendency of her track to wobble north every few hundred miles. As the storm came through the Territory, the eye passed over Virgin Gorda, Tortola, the East End of St John, and Jost Van Dyke. This put the west side of St John in the outer portion of the western eye wall. We sat in it for hours, and then, as we would've passed into the eye, the storm wobbled north, placing us in the southern eye wall. While the western side of the island was spared the devastating winds on the interior of the eye wall, we sat in Category 5 sustained winds for upwards of 6 hours. While official reports put the maximum sustained winds at 185 miles per hour, all the relevant meteorological equipment in the Territory was destroyed well before the peak of the storm, and the shared opinion of most residents is that sustained winds were well above 200 miles per hour, some say above 250. Compounded by dozens of tornados spawned across the island within the hurricane, the destruction we would eventually come to see was complete. It felt at times as if the concrete structure of my apartment would simply disintegrate, and our shuttered doors bowed and threatened to give way. We were fortunate, and they all held.

The sound of a storm of this magnitude is both indescribable and unforgettable.

When the winds died down to category 1 or tropical storm, it was dark out, so we had to wait until the next morning to see the damage. It was difficult to imagine that much could have been spared. When the sun came up on the 7th we were still under curfew, but we ventured out to check on neighbors and assess the damage. There was not a leaf left on the trees, save a few tenacious palm fronds. Palms are naturally designed to survive these events, their slender trunks have enough give and the fronds will blow about but generally weather the storm, but Irma was different. The trunks of many of the palms were snapped in half, which they can't recover from. Power poles were down or snapped everywhere it seemed - we would come to find out that St John lost over 90% of our power poles in the first storm. WAPA had shut down the grid the night before Irma arrived, so there was no concern of live lines, but it was clear that it would be a very, very long time before power was restored. In Enighed Pond, where the barge dock is located, several vessels had broken their lines, and were up in the mangroves, or sunk, or on the rocky beach. As we walked further out of our neighborhood, which is very near Cruz Bay proper, we began to see more and more people coming out of their homes, or their neighbors homes, wherever they had ridden out the storm. Each new face was a blessing, a relief, because mere hours before I'd been certain that some of my neighbors wouldn't survive. We walked down to town, surveying the damage and trying to get a cell signal to let our families in the States know we were safe. Along Bay Street, in front of Grande Bay, almost all the palms were snapped, and the poles were down all along the road. At least a dozen sailboats were beached in Cruz Bay, nestled up against the beachfront bars, piled on top of each other. A few boats, miraculously, remained afloat, but were as much as 80 feet from their original anchorage. Further towards the center of town, we found more and more people who were safe, a further relief. Friends who had weathered the storm in an office in the Mongoose Junction shopping center had lost windows and part of their roof, but somehow still had an active wireless connection thanks to their fiber optic line, and so I was able to get a message out to the States to notify my family. These friends, Siobhan Mulvey and Tenesha Keyes, had begun a list of people they'd confirmed safe, and were sharing it on social media. That internet connection would soon prove critical to the recovery efforts.

Shortly thereafter, we were gently reminded of the curfew by VIPD officers on patrol downtown, and returned home. Late on the morning of the 7th I saw the first Navy vessel off the south shore of St John, and the Navy Seahawk helicopters, and the sense of relief and hope was palpable. They weren't on shore yet, but help was nearby. We would learn that they had been waiting south of Haiti for the storm to pass, so that they would be well positioned to respond. At that point, we had no idea what to expect as far as federal response - historically St John is, as the smallest, the forgotten island of the Territory when it comes to aid, but we already had a sense that we had taken the most direct hit of the three islands. All that was left to do that Thursday was sit and wait. We knew Friday would bring more answers, because our friends Stephen Libbey and Ryan West had set a plan to meet at the Tap Room in Mongoose Junction to touch base and make sure we were all safe. What was intended as a meeting for friends would turn into a community gathering of hundreds of people.

Friday morning, before the meeting set for 10 am, we ventured out in the other direction from the previous day, down the south shore. Again, poles were down, debris was everywhere. The EC Gas Station had lost the roof to the pumps, and as we went over Jacobs Ladder, we saw that the Westin had a great deal of damage. Roofs off of many of the units and the lobby building close to destroyed. Everywhere on the hillsides you could see the destruction, in many places the lines of damage so clearly delineated that it could only have been wrought by tornados. We couldn't get much further than the Westin that day, so we headed back to town, towards the meeting place. Dozens of people had gathered, and representatives from VIFD, VIPD and the Coast Guard were there. No one was quite sure how the meeting had been organized, but there we were. This would become the first of many 10 am community meetings at Mongoose Junction, but after the first day, a much more organized, structured format was adopted. Presciently, that morning, Mongoose Junction owner and developer said, "the only way St John is gonna work is as a community", a sentiment which would be proven sooner than anyone expected. After the meeting, there was a sense of anxiety, because we didn't know when help would be coming - we'd seen the Navy and Coast Guard helicopters circling overhead but very little had been seen on the ground. There was no sign of FEMA yet on St John, and we were 2 days out from the storm. No one had spoken to St Thomas or St Croix, which meant that it was very likely that no one knew what our condition was. Yet there was also a sense of community cohesion, a feeling that if we didn't know when help was coming, we needed to start for ourselves. Restaurant owners and managers met to discuss who had a generator and could cook, and who could donate food from their walk-in to support the places that could open. Crews were assembled to clear debris from the roads, and lists were started of people who hadn't been heard from yet.

In the midst of this, I went to the other side of Mongoose Junction where businesses still had working internet. Several of them had posted their network passwords, and as I sent messages to my family and friends, I received a message from Nils Erickson, an friend who had lived on St John for many years but who is now based in New England. Nils informed me that he was working with a team in Fajardo, PR to get supplies over to St John, and that the boat would be arriving in Cruz Bay at 4 pm, roughly 2 hours from the time I received the message, and could we put together a list of 40 people to be evacuated back to Fajardo? Suddenly, there was an immediate mission. With Siobhan Mulvey, Tenesha Keyes, Ryan West and Stephen Libbey, we set about spreading the word to anyone who was high priority: pregnant women, mothers with young children, seniors, and anyone with non-emergency medical needs. We went to the National Park Dock to be ready to unload supplies, though where those supplies were going, we weren't yet sure. As more and more people showed up at the dock, we started a manifest for the captains, and a triage system in case we had more than 40 people trying to leave. When the boat was on the dock and we had unloaded the water, food, diapers, pet food, batteries, flashlights, and other supplies that were sent by our neighbors on Puerto Rico, we turned our attention to the evacuees. The first 20 were mothers and their young children. It was a heart wrenching scene as they said goodbye to their husbands and fathers, most of whom were staying to clean up and begin to

rebuild. Once they were boarded, the remaining people on the dock were lined up. In a moment of serendipity, it turned out that we had exactly 40 people waiting on the dock that day.

As Friday afternoon had progressed, we'd learned that we could anticipate 3 more boats from Puerto Rico on Saturday, as well as several from St Croix. The captains wanted to know if we would be back on the dock the next morning, and just like that, we had responsibilities. The next morning we all met early, at Cruz Bay Landing which was graciously serving the first of many breakfasts to the community. I believe they fed about a thousand people that first Saturday. After breakfast we went back down to the dock and with the help of other volunteers, set up a registration system for people who wanted to evacuate. Over the next ten days we worked with John Bergeron, from US Public Health, who was acting as Incident Commander for the National Park, to set up a system within which we could operate on the National Park Dock and within the National Park Visitors Center building. We also worked with captains and the US Coast Guard to get approvals for the boats to use the port, since technically the Ports didn't open until around the 10th of September. We were allowed, with other members of the community, to attend the morning briefings of FEMA, USCG, NPS, USACE, and other agencies and military deployments, which in turn allowed us to disseminate accurate and much needed information to the community through the 10 am meetings at Mongoose Junction, organized daily by Ryan West. We developed a close working relationship with both the Bloomberg Group and Kenny Chesney's Love for Love City Foundation as well, and in the process, largely because FEMA needed something to call us, we became known as Love City Strong. Over the course of the two weeks between Hurricane Irma and Hurricane Maria, and with the support of NPS, USCG, and Love for Love City, among others, we evacuated around 1,200 people to St Croix and Puerto Rico.

During those two weeks, our daily weather update came from the Coast Guard at the 7 am meeting, and Ryan relayed that to the greater St John community at 10 am. A representative in from Coral Bay would then relay the same information out there at their noon meeting. Still largely without communication island-wide, this was our lifeline, the only way to be prepared for approaching weather. There was some concern that Hurricane Jose would approach the islands, but that system stayed away. When Maria intensified, we initially thought that the storm would pass south of St Croix. After it became clear that we were in for another direct hit, we entered what was one of the most disheartening parts of the entire experience. We had, over two weeks, built up a solid response team of FEMA (after a slow start), Navy Reserve, USACE, USCG, and other federal deployments. According to their rules of operation, many teams were required to pull back to safety and redeploy after the event. Despite understanding, the optics of this phase are hard on community morale. Every team, without exception, went to great lengths to assure us that they would be back to continue to help, but we knew based on the track of Maria that we would now be splitting relief resources with Puerto Rico and St Croix as well, as they sat directly in her path.

While Irma was a wind event, Maria was a rain event. The already severely damaged island was drowned in almost 4 feet of rain in 12 hours. Drainage guts that were backed up with debris meant that flash flooding was largely unpredictable, and a massive storm surge combined with 30 foot seas meant that most of the few boats that had survived Irma did not have the same luck in Maria. To be devastated by a second Category 5 storm in 2 weeks is not something anyone should have to bear. Many of the people we had evacuated to St Croix and Puerto Rico ended up riding out the second storm in shelters on unfamiliar islands, and the guilt of having put them there was compounded by the guilt of having accepted supplies after Irma that those two islands now desperately needed themselves. It took four days after Maria for the ports to open, during which time we experienced fuel shortages and narrowly dodged critical water shortages. Gaps in the system that had become apparent post-Irma only became more apparent post-Maria.

The next four months include a lot of details, and many successes and failures. In the interest of brevity, what follows is a list of the gaps and weaknesses as I saw them, as well as a list of what went well and can be a model for future response.

#### Response Weaknesses

- FEMA deployment to St John was very slow in coming.
- VITEMA was understaffed and underfunded leading up to the storms, hindering their ability to be prepared and to execute their mission.
- FEMA regulations often didn't take into account the intricacies of life on St John, for example, FEMA assessors are not supposed to let applicants into their vehicles or ride in the applicants vehicles. This presented challenges on two levels: first, many residents don't have cars here, and certainly many didn't after the storms, and second, many residents live on their boats, but had trouble initially getting assessors onto their vessels. "The playbook doesn't work here" was a frequent lament
- Law Enforcement : most VIPD officers live on St Thomas. The team here for Irma didn't get relieved for 6 days after the storm, affecting morale and their ability to perform their duties effectively.
- Communications : everyone, including the Coast Guard and FEMA, struggled with this. We saw it firsthand due to our involvement with evacuations. Frequently communications were down even within a unit, let alone between agencies and NGO's
- Logistics : once Puerto Rico went down, shipping was slowed to a crawl. Many supplies would not have made it into the Territory if not flown in by private groups. Additionally, sourcing relief supplies was especially challenging this season because of the successive hits of Harvey, Irma, Maria, and Nate, as well as wildfires in the West.
- Aging and unmaintained infrastructure in the Territory was too susceptible to the storm and took extensive damage that proper infrastructure may have withstood. Roads and hospitals are the prime examples here.

- Damage to homes and displacement of residents is not addressed in a timely manner. There is still a large proportion of St Johnians who are residing somewhere other than their permanent residence, and the resources that are available are on a very long timetable. As we approach our next hurricane season, repairs that are more than temporary are needed, and needed quickly.
- Temporary Housing Solutions have also been slow in coming. St John is already short on housing in the best of times, so our population is particularly at risk with a large percentage of homes storm damaged or unlivable due to mold issues.
- Disaster Case Management is understaffed. Most of the disaster case managers we have on island are St John residents who are victims of the storms themselves, and they are vastly overcommitted on the number of cases they have to handle.

### Response Strengths

- Public/Private Partnerships : private philanthropy is the reason that St John's recovery has come along as swiftly as it has. Without the support of The Bloomberg Group and Love for Love City Foundation, as well as smaller private donors, we wouldn't have had the resources we needed. Generators, both commercial and private, food, water, medicine, critical equipment, debris removal... all of this and more were provided by these organizations. Additionally, the willingness of FEMA, NPS, USCG, USACE, and others to work with these private groups and local groups like Love City Strong enabled the partnerships to thrive and the community to get what they needed as efficiently as possible.
- The linemen who responded to restore power. We have BBC on St John and I know the other islands have linemen from other parts of the country, but it is nothing short of miraculous what they have done in six months. We cannot overstate their value to the recovery.

I'm sure I've overlooked somethings, a lot has happened of the past six months and it's challenging to condense it all into a cohesive report. The takeaway for me is two-fold:

First, our response and recovery on St John has been a unique blend of public and private partnerships. This is a model that will work going forward, and which needs to be solidified and supported.

Second, these events are going to be increasingly likely, and as we rebuild we must make sure that every stage of the the response and recovery are more resilient than before. That resiliency includes serious, permanent housing solutions, and a more effective program moving forward to help displaced residents.

Thank you for your time, and for your interest in reviewing the response. The community of St John and Love City Strong look forward to working with all partners to increase the resiliency and preparedness of St John and the greater U.S. Virgin Islands.