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## United Way Welcomes Habitat for Humanity As Its Newest Member Agency

*By Source staff*

Aug. 31, 2006 -- The United Way of St. Thomas-St. John will make Habitat for Humanity of the U.S. Virgin Islands (HFHVI) its 13th human services agency, according to a press release issued Thursday.

In 2007 United Way will begin allocating a portion of its donations to the local Habitat chapter in support of its mission to build and restore homes, as well as provide avenues to make home ownership possible for low-income families.

"Habitat for Humanity is the perfect complement to our comprehensive family of member agencies that play a vital role in strengthening our community," said United Way Executive Director Thyra Hammond in the release.

The release went on to call affordable housing "one of the most pressing issues facing the territory today," noting that "while the cost of living in the territory ranks among the highest in the United States, the average household income is among the lowest."

According to the release, about 22 percent of all V.I. families of four are living below the poverty level with little hope of ever attaining the dream of home ownership.

Habitat's V.I. chapter wants to begin to change this trend by providing more affordable homes and offering educational programs that assist low-income families in their pursuit of home ownership and financial security.

Increasing the availability of affordable housing is just one of the ways in which the community benefits from Habitat. "Building a Habitat home brings volunteers together from all economic backgrounds and walks of life. This interaction increases cultural awareness, helps to break down barriers and fosters a shared sense of belonging," said Tom Bolt, president of HFHVI.

According to the release, the local Habitat chapter is making progress towards funding and building the first Habitat Home in the U.S. Virgin Islands. A home site on St. Thomas has been acquired, and HFHVI is currently working to select its first partner family. HFHVI held two "Family Selection" public meetings that were attended by 130 people and resulted in 51 applications.

After a series of interviews, three finalist families are under consideration. After the partner family is selected, a groundbreaking will take place this fall. HFHVI hopes to complete construction by June 30, 2007, and identify four additional home sites by year's end 2007.

According to the release, Habitat's efforts directly tie in with United Way's goals of providing leadership, stimulating generosity, promoting volunteerism and allocating resources to improve community.

In 2006, United Way of St. Thomas-St. John raised more than \$750,000 in donations that were allocated to its member agencies based on need.

United Way of St. Thomas-St. John's 2007 fund-raising campaign will officially begin Oct. 1, 2006. The 2007 campaign will build on the momentum that began in 2005 with the theme, "Your Islands, Your Home, Your United Way."

According to the release, all locally raised funds will stay in the territory to directly serve the St. Thomas and St. John communities.