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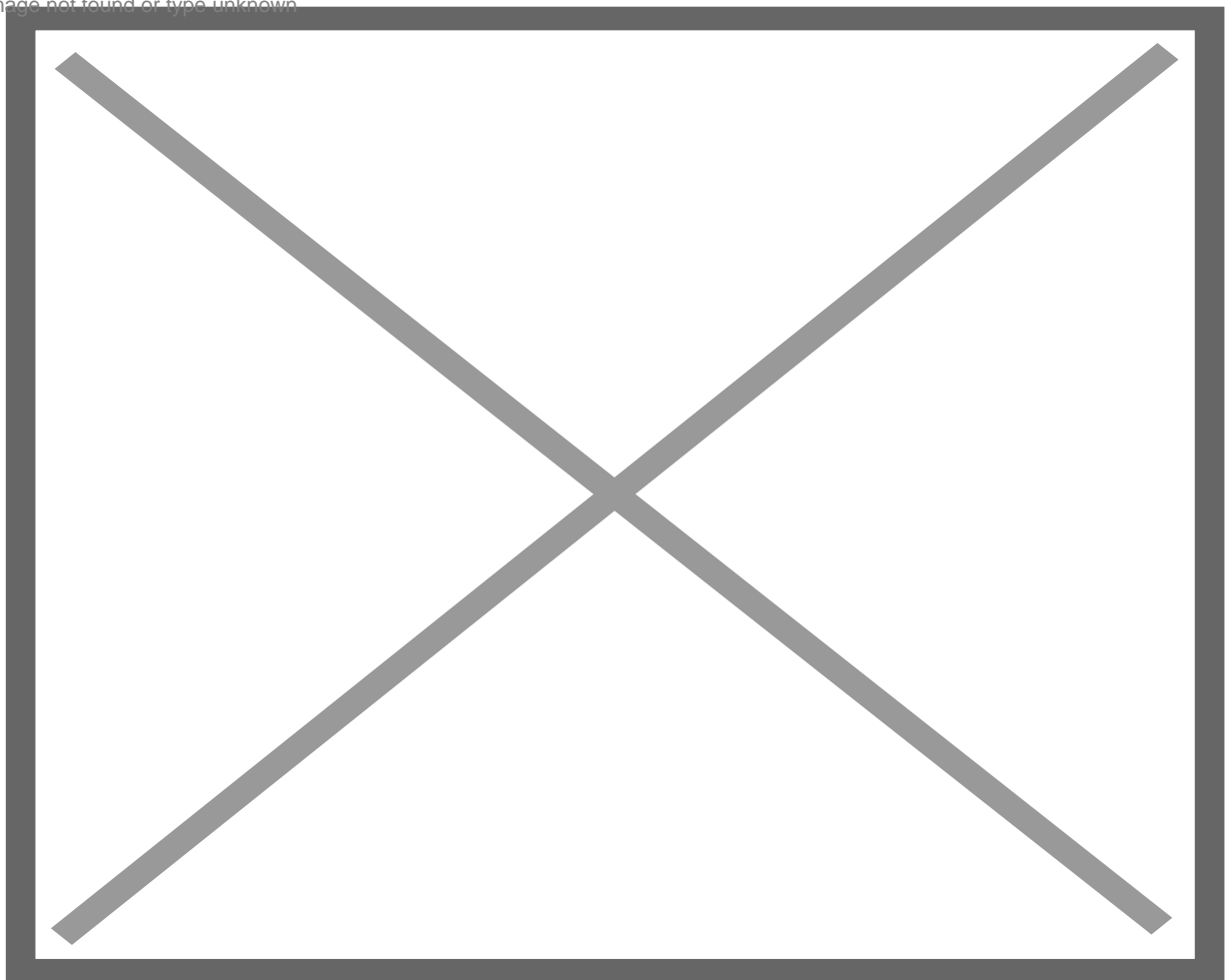
Officials Celebrate Completion of Yet Another Recovery Project At Ribbon-Cutting Ceremony for New WIC Building

A Testament to Timely Project Management: Celebrating the New WIC Facility

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Health officials from both districts flank Dept. of Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion, center, during Wednesday's ribbon-cutting affair of the Knud Hansen Complex in St. Thomas. By. MEDIA ONE/DEPT. OF HEALTH

The new Women, Infants and Children Building at the Department of Health's Knud Hansen Complex in St. Thomas is a testament to the results that can be obtained through the concerted, collaborative efforts of various government agencies.

The \$3.7 million dollar building was constructed from funds awarded in 2018 through the Bipartisan Budget Act by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and encompasses 5,200 square feet.

Dr. Nicole Craigwell-Syms, assistant commissioner in the V.I. Department of Health, served as the mistress of ceremonies for Wednesday's event, remarking to the assembled audience that this was her first experience of a “360” project, from ground-breaking to ribbon cutting. She described the event as a “momentous occasion,” a sentiment shared by Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion.

Ms. Encarnacion emphasized the importance of the WIC program to the community, noting that it provides crucial nutritional support for mothers, children and other family members. “WIC helps parents feed their children well during critical periods of growth and development,” she said, listing services such as nutritional assessment, nutrition counseling and education, as well as the provision of nutritious foods and referrals to other services. The benefits of the program, she added, last long after families leave the WIC umbrella.

Noting that reconstruction work began just over a year ago, Ms. Encarnacion proudly noted that “we committed to completing the project on time – and we did,” crediting the “grade-A project management team” in the Department of Health, who she said held weekly meetings with contractor J. Benton Construction LLC over the life of the project to ensure that things were moving forward on schedule.

Office of Disaster Recovery Director Adrienne Williams-Octalien was all smiles, as she declared that she loves ribbon-cutting ceremonies more than her second-favorite event – groundbreakings. She noted that the timely completion of the project proves that the local government is a “good steward of federal dollars.” She joked that the territory could now use this success to push for additional funding. “That means that when we come knocking, just give us some more.”

In his usual expansive mood at these events, Governor Albert Bryan Jr. praised the pace at which the project progressed, contrasting it with other long-running construction work such as the Paul E. Joseph stadium. He agreed with one member of the audience who joked that perhaps the Department of Health should take over project management for the stadium, and suggested a name change for the contractors - “J. Benton, Do it and Done!” he quipped, referencing USVI Artist Pressure Busspipe's Soca hit and VI Roadmarch, [Do it and Done](#).

Adopting a more somber tone, he turned his focus to highlighting the yeoman’s work being done by the teams of government workers in key agencies, especially in the aftermath of the twin Category 5 hurricanes that devastated the territory.

“When I came into office people were sitting around kitchen tables, working in really messed up conditions,” he recounted. “It was really bad.” Government workers, in addition to the pressures of trying to themselves recover from the impact of the storms, had to work assiduously on behalf of the community. “So we’re fixing a government that was sorely broken, we’re dealing with the fallout of the storm...we still kind of recovering from COVID,” he said, noting that the territory also had to grapple with brain drain caused by mass emigration following the pandemic.

Mr. Bryan pointed to the new building as evidence that despite these challenges, the territory is still able to build for the future, a testament to the strength and determination of the government’s cohort of workers.

During her remarks, Lizbeth Silbermann, Administrator of the USDA-FNS Northeast Regional Office, noted that the new WIC facility was located in the same physical space as the Department

of Human Services. “The co-location will break down logistic barriers for participants who receive benefits from both the WIC and SNAP programs,” she said, which would ensure greater access to the “full suite of health and nutrition benefits” for those who are eligible. “It will be a place to promote and live the ‘We care’ mantra,” Ms. Silbermann envisioned.

She commended the territory for its embrace of breastfeeding promotion, as evidenced by the dedicated breastfeeding room in the new facility. This focus, Ms. Silbermann says, has resulted in the Virgin Islands having the highest breastfeeding rate in the nation – 71 percent.

The new facility, Ms. Encarnacion hopes, will be welcomed by the community and assist in the development and growth of “strong, healthy Virgin Islanders.”

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