

logo not found or type unknown

\$75 WAPA Credits Coming in January; DOH Confirms Two Lead-Positive Children After Blood Test Results

Agency hosted virtual small business town hall to provide update on St. Croix water emergency

Health / **Published On December 21, 2023 06:19 AM /**

Janeke Simon **December 21, 2023**

Image not found or type unknown



V.I. Water and Power Authority officials on Wednesday provided critical updates to St. Croix residents on the water emergency, particularly affecting small business owners. Also at the meeting, the V.I. Dept. of Health revealed that two children have tested positive for lead, while three were positive for copper.

Meanwhile, WAPA announced that it has distributed over 52,000 water vouchers to residents, with customer credits slated for January 5, 2024.

Much of the other information presented was already in the public domain, namely that the initial alarming test results that precipitated emergency declarations from the local and federal governments, have since been supplanted by more recent testing that suggests the problem is not as acute as first believed.

Nevertheless, officials at yesterday's town hall reiterated their commitment to handling the water quality issue on St. Croix with urgency, ensuring that all interventions are tailored towards making the potable water supply safe to use for all residents.

Among the status updates provided, territorial epidemiologist DOH Territorial Epidemiologist Dr. Esther Ellis disclosed that the Department of Health had, as of last Friday, tested 1270 children aged 6 and under. Two have since been confirmed positive for lead, and three for copper. Fifty other results are pending confirmation, Dr. Ellis said, warning of the dangers of lead exposure from various sources including water, paint, soil, car batteries, imported toys, cookware, and spices among others.

Meanwhile, WAPA Chief Operating Officer Noel Hodge disclosed that over 52,000 water vouchers have been distributed to residents in affected areas, including those living in public and private housing communities. Meals on Wheels recipients and those on the program's waiting list have also been included in the voucher distribution, with arrangements being made for elderly persons to have someone collect the vouchers on their behalf.

Don Gregoire, director of water distribution at WAPA, said that the previously announced customer credits would be issued on January 5, 2024, in the amount of \$75. The distribution of faucet filters and filter pitchers will also begin next month, Mr. Gregoire said, noting that funding for the items is coming from the Clean Water Drinking Fund, administered by the Department of Planning and Natural Resources.

In terms of public information, the Federal Emergency Management Agency is currently assisting with developing interactive maps which will then be posted on the cleanwaterusvi.com website. The maps are intended to show the results of water sampling tests that are being conducted across a wide geographical area.

DPNR Commissioner Jean Pierre Oriol said of the latest round of sampling, "We are 100 percent aware that we're going for overkill...it's because the objective is related not to compliance monitoring, but actually to address the fact that a state of emergency was inaccurate."

The goal was to ensure confidence in the results of the last round of testing. "For this particular effort, overkill is an absolute must," he declared.

Just under half of the 36 locations that initially returned high readings of lead and copper have had new service lines installed which contain lead-free components. "We're going to continue to push that initiative forward," promised Mr. Gregoire, while Mr. Hodge disclosed that the Environmental Protection Agency has issued a deadline of October 2024 for WAPA to complete the inventory of components in the water distribution system that have lead and need to be replaced.

In response to queries from attendees at the meeting, Mr. Hodge also noted that the water emergency will result in more stringent testing moving forward. "In terms of the regulatory sampling for lead and copper...we will be going back to a more frequent sampling. We're currently at every three years, but it's likely now that we're going to go back to every six months, and then possibly double the number of sampling in each district."

