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WAPA Continues to Tackle Brown Water Crisis; Health Officials Confirm Additional Lead-Positive Case

Dr. Donna Christiansen calls for broader investigation into children's cognitive and behavioral health

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At this week's virtual town hall meeting, V.I. Water and Power Authority officials said they are diligently pursuing solutions to St. Croix's "brown water" problem, while attendees urged health authorities to expand their investigation into children's cognitive and behavioral issues.

Don Gregoire, director of water distribution for the St. Croix, said that there has been ongoing rehabilitation within the community. Downtown Frederiksted and Christiansted have had the iron piping removed and replaced with PVC, with the Clifton Hill area also completed as of the end of last year. In Campo Rico, that work is about 70 percent completed, according to Mr. Gregoire, with WAPA awaiting the arrival of additional materials to address the outstanding work.

Hannah's Rest will be the next area to be tackled, Mr. Gregoire said, with work there expected to begin in the first quarter of this year.

Additional hydrants have been installed to facilitate flushing in areas of the distribution system that are known to collect stagnant water in order to ensure that water is moving throughout the system.

Regarding corrosion control chemicals, "We're trying to get that spread out through the entire water distribution system," Mr. Gregoire advised. "We anticipate to see some significant improvement in our water quality within the next six months," he stated. Long term planning is also ongoing, with WAPA anticipating the proposed wholesale prudent replacement of the water distribution system to be approved in the first quarter of 2024 as well.

Meanwhile, health officials have confirmed [an additional case](#) of lead exposure, bringing the total to three children of the 1,270 tested as of January 15. A further 17 potential cases are pending confirmation via venous blood testing, according to territorial epidemiologist Esther Ellis.

The homes of those with positive cases were assessed, with lead found in cookware and the flooring, Dr. Ellis said. She also noted that the pediatric lead screening program will expand to St. Thomas, St. John, and Water Island at the end of this month. Six children have been identified with copper levels marginally above the "cutoff limit," Dr. Ellis disclosed, but no negative health effects have cropped up in that regard.

Meanwhile, for Congresswoman Dr. Donna Christiansen urged authorities to look past the question of potential lead exposure and continue to investigate children's physical and cognitive health. Against the backdrop of an [alarming report](#) recently released by the St. Croix Foundation, Dr. Christiansen exhorted officials to "let us continue to look at why our children are having so many problems."

Given the miniscule percentage of those tested who have been confirmed positive for lead exposure, Dr. Christiansen deduced that the issue "does not appear to be lead," but maintained that lead testing should continue, but as part of a more comprehensive investigation into the concerns being raised "about our children's learning ability, their behavioral issues, and other things."