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## New Research Program Aims To Build Interest In Medicine, Provide Crucial Data on Territory's Cardiovascular Health

**The partnership aims to boost cardiovascular health and research skills among Virgin Islanders, marking a step toward local medical excellence.**

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**Dr. Sonjia Kenya developed the Cardiovascular Research Empowerment Workforce program at the Miller School of Medicine at the University of Miami.**

A new partnership between health institutions in Miami and here in the territory has been launched, aimed at improving cardiovascular health outcomes in the USVI.

On Monday, Lieutenant Governor Tregenza Roach was joined by local health officials and representatives from the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine to unveil plans for the Cardiovascular Research Empowerment Workforce program.

The five-year initiative will provide research and training opportunities for 50 Virgin Islanders interested in cardiovascular medicine. Students will spend two weeks at the University of Miami learning cutting-edge research techniques. They will then return to conduct their own paid research with the V.I. Department of Health over the summer, mentored by local experts as well as those attached to the University of Miami.

Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion emphasized the importance of the program, noting that heart disease is a leading cause of death. "Cardiovascular research plays a crucial role in enhancing medical knowledge and improving patient care," she said. Dr. Sonjia Kenya, who developed the program at the Miller School of Medicine in order to cultivate physician scientists, added that the goal is to "inspire 50 Virgin Islanders to pursue careers in cardiovascular medicine and come back to serve their homeland."

Remarking that she first met DOH Chief Medical Officer Tai Hunte-Cesar when she was at the Miller School of Medicine undergoing a residency in global health and infectious disease, Dr. Kenya said the two women quickly became close. "Dr. Hunt Cesar and I bonded over our shared passion for serving our people using culturally tailored strategies, and delivering research-driven care to ensure that our communities had access to the highest quality of evidence-based medicine," Dr. Kenya remarked.

She added, "I am so excited to build this program with my dear friend Dr. Hunt-Cesar, and begin developing additional research initiatives to address local health disparities. This is just the beginning."

University of the Virgin Islands President Dr. David Hall was also present at the program's launch. He praised the partnership for aligning with UVI's vision of improving local healthcare, calling it "a step in [the] direction" towards a medical school located within UVI itself.

"It creates a wonderful nexus between what has existed before and what we believe would exist in the future," Mr. Hall said, highlighting Dr. Hunt-Cesar's position as the founding dean of the yet-to-be realized medical school "that we are working so hard to bring into existence." The research partnership, he said, was helping local officials "come closer to the manifestation of this dream of having a robust, excellent medical school."

For her part, Dr. Tai Hunt-Cesar shared how her own research experience was instrumental in her career. As Dr. Kenya's student, she conducted a project on community health workers that resulted in a published journal article. "This is how research translates and contributes to service," Dr. Cesar said. She told listeners that she eagerly looks forward to mentoring the next generation of local health professionals through the next five years of this program.

Applications for the Cardiovascular Research Empowerment Workforce program open today January 29, and will run until February 29. Applicants will be selected on April 1, and the program itself will run from June 17 through August 9.