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Human Services Pleads With Community For Help With Mental Health in Wake of 9-Year-Old's Death

Averil George stresses the importance of community awareness for DHS intervention

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Averil George, commissioner nominee for the V.I. Department of Human Services, responding to a question about DHS's role in addressing mental health, told lawmakers on Wednesday that her agency can only intervene in situations that they are aware of.

She was responding to an inquiry from Senator Carla Joseph on the death of a nine-year-old girl in St. Thomas, allegedly [at the hands of her mother](#). The mother, Anyah Smith, was subsequently charged with first-degree murder and other offenses.

For Governor Bryan Jr., who first disclosed the apparent culpability of Ms. Smith in her daughter's tragic death, the incident was indicative of the fragile mental health of some Virgin Islanders. Speaking during Monday's Government House press briefing, he encouraged members of the community to "be our brother's keeper." That phrase was echoed by Ms. George on Wednesday during her confirmation hearing in the Senate Committee on Rules and Judiciary.

"We as community members need to show empathy and compassion. We're our brother's keeper, so if you see anybody needs help you make that call as well," she pleaded. "It doesn't have to be them calling out, but you can reach out and say you have an individual that you think could use DHS's services." According to Ms. George, the services of the Department of Human Services are available to all, however the department must first "be in the know."

Ms. George revealed that talks are underway with the V.I. Dept. of Health to discuss "what steps we can take moving forward to assist the mental crisis here," an effort she sees resulting in a partnership between the two important government arms.

The tragic incident continues to trouble members of the wider community as well as lawmakers. Senator Kenneth Gittens commented that the matter was "sad" and wondered "where were those in our community? Where were those at the school? Where were those, even in the church?" Along with Ms. George, he urged Virgin Islanders to "just pay attention." "It's all of our business," he said.