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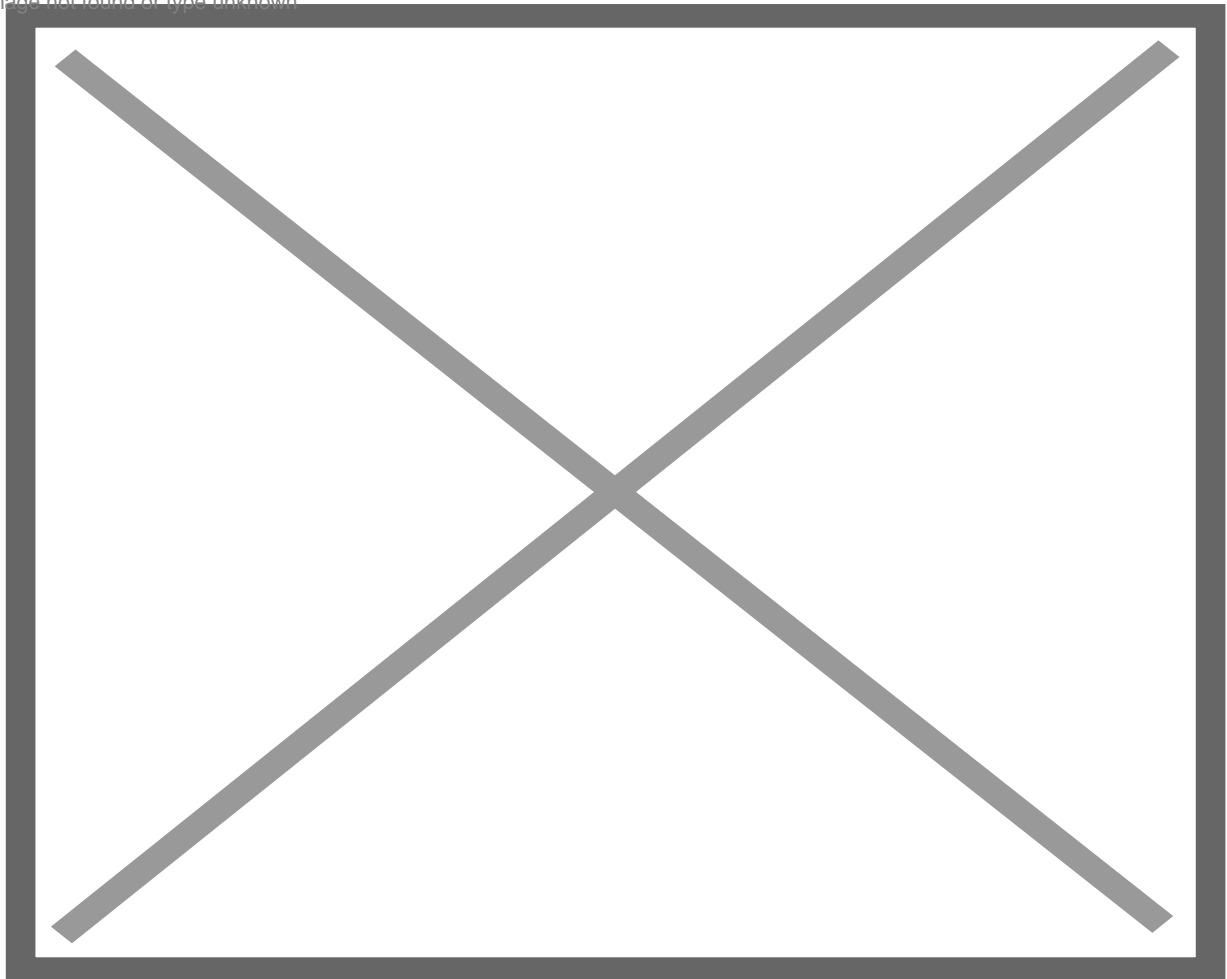
USVI Battles with Diabetes as Sixth Leading Cause of Death

Senate seeks urgent interventions as disease ranks 6th in cause of death

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Wednesday's meeting of the Committee on Health, Hospitals and Human Services to discuss the public health challenges in managing diabetes in the territory revealed that immediate interventions are necessary.

According to Julia Sheen, executive director of the Virgin Islands Diabetes Center of Excellence (VIDCOE), diabetes is the 6th leading cause of death in the USVI, with over 12,000 people currently known to be living with the disease. Several risk factors exist in the population, she said, including insufficient exercise and a tendency to eat unbalanced diets. While women show up more frequently in diabetes numbers, Ms. Sheen noted that it could simply be a case of

underreporting in men.

Statistics on diabetic children were largely excluded from Ms. Sheen's testimony, prompting Senator Diane Capehart to ask "how many children in the Virgin Islands have diabetes?" In a response that left legislators with more questions than answers, Ms. Sheen revealed that she could not find any data in the Virgin Islands that collects information on children and risk factors and health habits. "We don't have that information which I think is very critical," Ms. Sheen said.

An understanding of the numbers relative to overweight and obese children in the territory, Ms. Sheen said, would better allow VIDCOE to "intervene to try to provide more education for them because they would be at risk for developing diabetes."

Despite the lack of data, she assured lawmakers that the Center is working to visit more schools to "try to prevent the onset of diabetes, particularly among children who are overweight and obese." Senator Milton Potter conveyed a suggestion by a concerned citizen that all fourth-grade students be screened for pre-diabetic conditions or risk factors, an idea supported by Ms. Sheen, provided that parental consent and funding could be sourced.

Senator Kenneth Gittens discussed another aspect of a comprehensive approach to diabetes management from a public health perspective. He argued that the territory does not have enough public facilities that could be used for exercise, an important factor in both the prevention and management of diseases like diabetes.

In her testimony, Ms. Sheen spoke of the need for more walkable spaces, calling on the support of the private sector. Mr. Gittens disagreed. "Why [can't we] invest in ourselves and partner with ourselves by fixing our properties so that our people can have access to these facilities?" he asked, complaining about the unavailability of the Frederiksted pool. Acknowledging the issues with the pool itself, Mr. Gittens nevertheless called on the relevant authorities to "fix the grounds so that the people can be able to utilize the property."

Mr. Gittens also expressed displeasure with the demolition of the Arthur A Richards Junior High School, which eliminated several public recreational areas. "On that ground there was not only a gym, there was a track that people greatly utilized; tennis courts that people utilized...a baseball field there and a whole bunch of other sports that you could have utilized that facility for," he stated. The senator's final appeal was for frequently maintained sidewalks that would allow health-conscious people to walk safely along the roadways. "If we're talking about healthy living and we want people to exercise and walk, then we have to provide the facilities for them," Mr. Gittens maintained.

Lawmakers all agreed that a multisectoral approach is needed. Several highlighted the need to actively include the Departments of Education and Human Services in the fight against diabetes. According to figures provided in Wednesday's committee meeting, managing diabetes patients in the territory comes at a cost of some \$120 million per year.