

The Virgin Islands Consortium

As Coronavirus Reaches at Least 44 Countries With Over 2,700 Deaths, USVI Officials Said to Be 'Closely Monitoring' Epidemic

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Worker wearing protective gear as he sprays antiseptic inside a train in Seoul amid rising concerns about the spread of coronavirus. By. CHUNG SUNG-JUN / GETTY IMAGES

Even as President Donald Trump downplayed the impact and risk to the United States of the coronavirus during a press briefing Wednesday night, the deadly pathogen has spread to at least 44 countries, with Australia's prime minister warning of a "global pandemic."

In the U.S. Virgin Islands, health officials say they are "closely monitoring" the situation, with the Dept. of Health stating in a release that it has been following the virus since 2019.

"While there are no reported cases in the Caribbean region, including the United States Virgin Islands, Health Department officials remain vigilant by actively monitoring the situation and encourage residents and visitors to do the same and to follow its guidelines," the department said.

D.O.H.'s Epidemiology Division, led by Territorial Epidemiologist Dr. Esther Ellis, is monitoring the coronavirus outbreak closely, conducting surveillance, and will assist with laboratory testing and contact tracing as needed to quickly contain any possible cases," according to the department.

D.O.H. said it has shared guidance based on the public health response from the Centers for Diseases Control and Prevention (CDC) and has provided training to staff at the Juan F. Luis Hospital and the Schneider Regional Medical Center. The health department said it will be providing in-person training to all clinics across the territory. A timeline was not given.

On the U.S. mainland, Mr. Trump downplayed the threat to the states and lauded U.S. health officials as the best in the world. "We're very, very ready for this, for anything, whether it is going to be a breakout of larger proportions or whether or not we're at that very low level," Mr. Trump said during the White House briefing flanked by administration health officials and Vice President Mike Pence. "Because of all we've done, the risk to the American people remains very low."

The Trump administration has chosen Mr. Pence to lead the fight against the virus. The administration has also requested \$2.5 billion from Congress. However, some lawmakers have criticized the request and said that more funding would be needed.

According to the Wall Street Journal, citing people familiar with the matter, officials have also discussed having the Food and Drug Administration grant authorization to state and local health labs to design their own coronavirus tests without going through the current regulatory process, a source of frustration for public-health officials.

Fifteen locally diagnosed cases have been confirmed on the U.S. mainland, including a case on Wednesday in California involving a person that reportedly had no travel history or exposure to another person known to have had the coronavirus. If confirmed, it would be the first case in the U.S. that lacks a clear explanation as to how the disease was spread.

"We have been anticipating the potential for such a case in the U.S., and given our close familial, social and business relationships with China, it is not unexpected that the first case in the U.S. would be in California," said Sonia Angell, director of the California Department of Public Health.. "We are already responding."

In the U.S. Virgin Islands, health officials are urging residents who may have traveled to Wuhan China, the center of the epidemic and where it is believed to have originated from, to take precautionary measures. D.O.H. said if you have been in close contact with someone known to have traveled to Wuhan, China and have developed symptoms, call

ahead before going to see a doctor or emergency room to reveal your symptoms, and also that you had traveled Wuhan. Symptoms may include fever and lower respiratory illnesses like a dry cough or shortness of breath.

“It is our hope that we will not have any cases of this virus within our jurisdiction. However, it is necessary for us to be prepared and mindful, nonetheless,” said D.O.H. Medical Director Dr. Marc Jerome.

Department of Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion warned residents that while the novel coronavirus should be taken seriously, residents should also take precaution to avoid the spread of influenza by getting the flu vaccine, washing hands with soap and water, covering your nose and mouth when coughing and using a flexed elbow when sneezing. Residents should also avoid close contact with anyone with cold or flu-like symptoms.

Department of Tourism Director of Communications Alani Henneman-Todman stated that D.O.T. has been closely monitoring the situation and will continue to be in close dialogue with the Health Department. “While we promote tourism and encourage travel to and from the Virgin Islands, we encourage travelers to take precaution with their health and the health of others and to follow Department of Health guidelines,” stated Mrs. Henneman-Todman.

The Virgin Islands Port Authority is also in close communication with the Health Department and has received guidance on the outbreak of the 2019 novel coronavirus, according to D.O.H.

U.S. stocks fell for the fifth consecutive session Wednesday as investors continued to assess the economic impact of the coronavirus epidemic, according to WSJ. U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar said the U.S. should expect more coronavirus cases, and Mr. Trump called on schools to prepare “just in case.” He said he didn’t think it was inevitable that the virus would spread across the U.S.

So far more than 2,700 people have died from the virus. The CDC has been working to roll its coronavirus test kits out to other public-health labs, but the process was stalled when some labs got inconclusive results, according to WSJ. About 445 people have been tested.