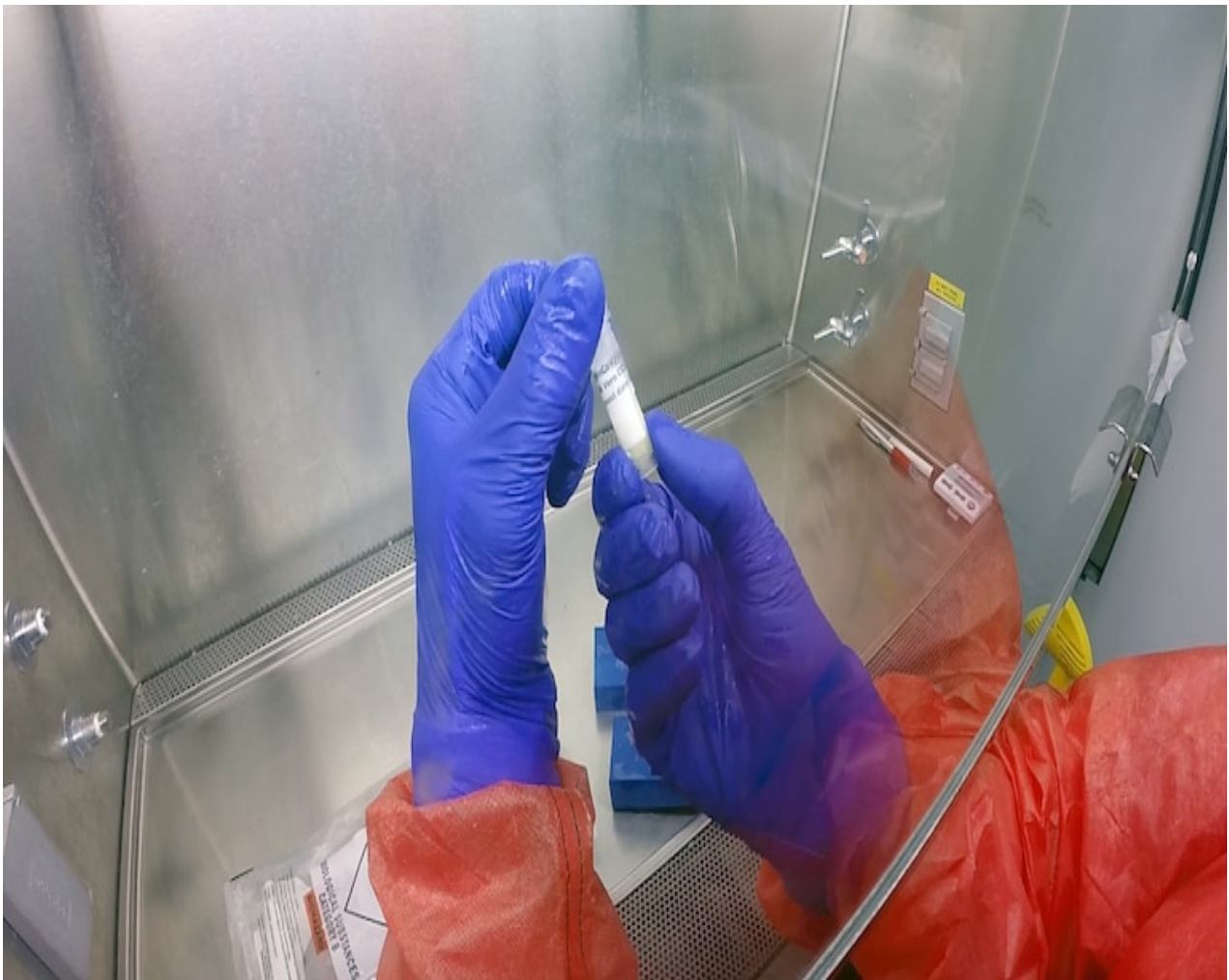


The Virgin Islands Consortium

Public Health and Gov’t Experts Assure Senate That USVI Follows All CDC Planning and Response Protocols for a Coronavirus Outbreak

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Virgin Islands public health experts and government bureaucrats spent Thursday evening detailing for the Senate Committee on Health, Hospitals and Human Services the "whole-of-government" preparations and planning in the event one or more confirmed cases of the fast-spreading coronavirus, also known as COVID-19, appear in the territory.

Frederiksted Health Care Inc. CEO Massarae Sprauve Webster told lawmakers that health center "... is acutely aware of the vulnerability faced by the U.S. Virgin Islands regarding an outbreak of COVID-19. Every year, an estimated 2 million tourists from all

over the world visit the Virgin Islands, in addition the many transient workers who work/visit the island for both hurricane-related rebuilding and work to open the Limetree [Bay] refinery.

"Each one of these individuals brings the potential of COVID-19 transmission to our community," Ms. Sprauve Webster said. "We take seriously our role as a leader in primary care provision and our responsibility to prepare for and respond to public health emergencies such as the possibility of a COVID-19 epidemic."

Moleto A. Smith Jr., executive director of the St. Thomas East End Medical Center Corp., said STEEMCC stood up its coronavirus training and response plan in December when the potentially deadly virus emerged in mainland China. "Our plans are in place, and in line with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and VI Department of Health," Mr. Smith told lawmakers. "STEEMCC developed its protocol of quarantining in pre-identified areas, triaging, notifying the Department of Health, taking required samples for testing ..."

Sanitation of the quarantine area, including disinfection all surfaces, will help to " ... reassure the public and the Legislature that medical institutions in the territory are following Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidance and criteria for planned responses should any confirmed cases of coronavirus, also known as COVID19, surface," Mr. Smith said.

The Juan F. Luis Hospital is to be stocked with adequate supplies of protective apparel and equipment, cleaning supplies and other materials necessary to keep hospital staff and patients and staff safe under a proper quarantine area at JFL, lawmakers heard Thursday. Unfortunately, JFL's third floor is used to house the hospital's isolation room. Isolation is, historically, where JFL would house any highly infectious patient. A second isolation room was compromised by collapse of underground plumbing. "Despite the current physical limitations," JFL anticipates the opening of the intensive care unit on March 13th, where ventilated and isolated patients would be managed."

The entire third floor of JFL was devastated during Hurricane Maria in 2017. Plans were developed whereby the V.I. National Guard would provide a CDC-approved isolation unit, if necessary.

Plans were developed for the National Guard to become a isolation unit for those at JFL who might present with symptoms of coronavirus.

Dr. Louis Amara acting CEO of Schneider Regional, said the hospital system, which include Myra Keating on St. John, has a COVID19 response team in place, which includes medical and clinical staff, infection control, lab and other disciplines. "Patient care would be provided by designated staff," Amaro said. That staff would, in turn, be monitored for the development of disease symptoms.

VI Department of Finance Commissioner Kirk Callwood Sr. said his office is in regular contact with the Dept. of Health " ... in the event the coronavirus disease becomes a direct threat to the territory." Mr. Callwood said the finance department is prepared for the contingencies called on if a state of emergency is declared. "We stand ready to coordinate, ready to expedite funds for critical needs."

He added, "The current business continuity plan will be activated. Since our financial system is cloudbased, it allows for remote access ... we stand ready to coordinate... ready to expedite funds for critical needs. Any material drop in revenue we are ready to discuss the FEMA disaster loan programs."

Sen. Oakland Benta, chairman of the Committee of Health, Hospitals and Human Services, opened an informative round of questioning by asking how the Dept. of Health and other organizations were ensuring that public service messaging around the spread of coronavirus reaches everyone, including undocumented immigrants or the hearing impaired.

The territory relies on U.S. international airports and the cruise line owners to pre-screen travelers coming to the territory. But what about private yachts? That was Sen. Marvin Blyden's question.

Suspected cases will be self-quarantined at home unless medical attention is required, the Legislature said in a Thursday evening press release. "Test results will be confirmed within 24-48 hours," according to the release.

"Thus far, hospitals and clinics are trained for proper handling of COVID-19 cases. V.I. Territorial Emergency Management Agency Director Daryl Jaschen in collaboration with DOH conducted a Tabletop exercise to prepare local and federal agencies for the pandemic. Furthermore, VITEMA 9-1-1 Emergency Dispatch is trained to address callers with flu-like symptoms, the Territory has the CDC recommended COVID-19 personal protective equipment, and information is disseminated via media to educate the public on the respiratory virus," the release states.

In Separate Actions:

The Senate voted favorably for two bills regarding Mental Health Awareness Month and Medicaid.

Bill No. 33-0244- An Act to amend Title 1, chapter 11 of the Virgin Islands Code to declare the month of May as Virgin Islands Mental Health Awareness Month, to assign the responsibilities of increasing mental health awareness, and to reduce the stigma of mental illness to the Department of Health and the Department of Education. "It is time to finally eliminate the stigma of mental health and promote mental wellness. Research has shown that 50% of African Americans do not utilize mental health services in comparison to their Caucasian counterparts. Mental Health is a serious matter," said Sen. Donna Frett Gregory, one of the sponsors of the bill. The measure was also proposed by Sen. Alicia Barnes, Sen. Novelle Francis, Jr., and Sen. Steven Payne.

Moreover, V.I. Department of Health (DOH) Commissioner Justa Encarnacion stated that the observation of mental health facilitates awareness of the daily challenges that individuals and their families face regarding their behavioral health and well-being. Similarly, Dr. Celia Victor, Administrator for the Office of Residential Services at the Department of Human Services mentioned that the community will benefit from the robust awareness campaigns regarding the common warning signs, symptoms, and sharing information about where to receive help, what happens after a diagnosis, and selecting treatment options. Sen. Francis indicated that significant strides are being taken

towards mental health awareness in the Virgin Islands. “This bill not only enables the Legislature to have oversight but to have input in how Mental Health Awareness Month is organized, directed, and the qualifications of persons involved. This is a winner for the Territory,” Sen. Oakland Benta said.

Bill No. 33-0242- A Resolution to petition the members of 116th United States Congress to terminate the statutory cap on overall Medicaid funding to the Territory, to eliminate the specific limit of 55% on the rate of federal matching funds for Medicaid in the Territory and to provide for the eligibility of the Territory to receive Medicaid disproportionate share hospital payments, so that the Territory can strengthen its Medicaid Program to enroll and provide care for all of the Territory’s residents who are Medicaid eligible and for additional funding to help offset the Territory’s uncompensated care costs. Schneider Regional Medical Center (SRMC) Interim Chief Executive Officer Dr. Luis Amaro noted that as a result of the changes to the Medicaid rates there is a reduction in uncompensated care costs, increased collection and SRMC was able to make capital improvement purchases. However, if the Medicaid cap remains and the rate increases are discontinued then SRMC will be unable to provide the same access.