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Dr. Tai Hunte-Cesar Honored as 'Champion of the Year' by U.S. Department of Defense

Recognized for her leadership in the USVI wellness mission, Hunte-Cesar's efforts brought \$2.25 million in free medical services to over 2,100 residents through the IRT program

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Dr. Tai-Hunte-Cesar, VIDOH CMO, with members of the Innovative Readiness Training team: Master Sgt. Clifford Baker, Sr. Master Sgt. Cristina Cantu, Maj. Mu Zhang, and Sr. Airman Andrea President.

Dr. Tai Hunte-Cesar, chief medical officer of the V.I. Department of Health, has been recognized by the Department of Defense as the "Champion of the Year" for her leadership in supporting the U.S. Virgin Islands' wellness mission.

The prestigious award was granted by the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve, which oversees the Innovative Readiness Training (IRT) Program.

The IRT Program provides free medical services to communities across the United States and its territories. In 2023, Dr. Hunte-Cesar applied on behalf of DOH to bring the program's services to the Virgin Islands. The mission was realized in June, when the IRT deployed to the territory, [offering residents essential medical, dental, and optometry services](#) as part of the USVI Wellness Fair.

Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion praised Dr. Hunte-Cesar for her role in leading this initiative. "We are incredibly proud of Dr. Hunte-Cesar. She led this initiative with extraordinary skill, assembling a dedicated team to manage logistics, collaborate with healthcare providers, and engage with community businesses and government agencies," said Encarnacion. "Her dedication to decreasing health disparities in the VI was shown in her determination to expand access to care by introducing no-cost medical services to both districts."

Dr. Hunte-Cesar's efforts culminated in early August when she was honored with the "Champion of the Year" award by the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve. She accepted the award at the 2024 Joint Workshop for Operational Mission Planners, held at the Logistics Management Institute in Tysons, Virginia, on August 29. Dr. Hunte-Cesar was accompanied by her husband, Christopher Cesar, at the ceremony.

According to correspondence from the Assistant Secretary's Office, the award is given annually to individuals who have significantly contributed to the IRT mission. "An awards panel chose you among all submissions for the Champion of the Year for your work planning and executing an IRT mission while displaying exemplary leadership by identifying opportunities to increase readiness and encouraging collaboration and innovation," stated the communication.

The 2023 IRT mission, which took a year of careful planning, saw the deployment of approximately 300 military medical professionals and support staff to the U.S. Virgin Islands. They provided an estimated \$2.25 million worth of medical services to 2,112 residents over the course of a week.

"I am deeply honored by this recognition," said Dr. Hunte-Cesar. "This award is also a testament to the hard work of the entire VI Department of Health team. I also extend my gratitude to Commissioner Encarnacion and Governor Albert Bryan Jr. for their unwavering support in making this mission a success."

The IRT mission was part of Governor Bryan's Healthier Horizons initiative, aimed at strengthening families and improving health outcomes in the territory. Building on this success, Dr. Hunte-Cesar and the IRT are now planning their 2025 mission, with the goal of continuing to provide free medical care to the residents of the U.S. Virgin Islands.