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# Public Health Officials: So Far, Territory Remains Free of Coronavirus; New Test Kits Have Arrived and Are Being Prepped for Use

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As of Monday afternoon, the Virgin Islands remained free of any confirmed cases of the novel coronavirus rapidly spreading across the globe, said V.I. Health officials during a press conference Monday. Results are still pending from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention testing an additional suspected case, called "Persons Under Investigation" by health officials.

While much of the country continues to grapple with a shortage of testing kits for the coronavirus (COVID19), the VI Department of Health said it will soon be able to conduct tests of nasal and oral swabs for the coronavirus, also known as COVID19. "We have received the test kits and will be able to conduct testing on-island," said Dr. Esther Ellis, D.O.H. territorial epidemiologist. With local testing capabilities, the number of people tested — and the potential for suspicious cases will

increase.

There have been four "Persons Under Investigation" for potential exposure, Dr. Ellis said. So far, three have tested negative. "The Department of Health (D.O.H.) expects and increase in the number of cases tested," she said. Dr. Ellis did not clarify how many of those test kits are available or how many the department of health projects might be potentially needed.

Accurate testing is critical to stopping a disease outbreak. When a case is confirmed, health officials move to isolate this person in an effort to contain the disease's spread. There's then an attempt to get in touch with the persons that the victim of coronavirus came in contact with so that they, too, do not spread the virus.

There is plenty of reason for caution, but no cause of panic in the Virgin Islands, local health officials said.

Dr. Ellis said the result for the fourth suspected case should return to the USVI this week. She also said that D.O.H. would provide breakdown of cases per district, if the disease spreads to multiple persons. The Dept. of Health has been treating each suspected case as if it were confirmed, which means persons that those suspected to have the disease have been in contact with are also contacted in an effort to contain a possible spread, Dr. Ellis said.

According to health officials there are six to eight beds in units at Schneider Regional Medical Center that can be utilized as isolation or quarantine beds. There is one such bed at the Juan F. Luis Hospital on St. Croix, said D.O.H. Commissioner Justa Encarnacion. The JFL intensive care unit is expected to reopen as early as this week for the first time since the 2017 hurricanes. "We are working with both hospitals to secure several isolation rooms to care for patients," she said. D.O.H. said it's working with federal agencies to secure approvals to transfer patients off-island, should that ever become necessary.

V.I. National Guard Adjutant General, Kodjo Knox-Limbacker, said the Guard is prepared to activate an emergency response once the request is made via a state of emergency declaration locally or on the federal level, and that it could have a quarantine site up and ready within a day, since it has been making plans in case it is called upon.

Government House dispatched public health and safety officials on Monday to discuss the administration's response to COVID19 from future testing capacity to a robust public health information campaign, and assuring medical personnel have sufficient personal protective equipment for front line healthcare and first responders in the territory.

But the vulnerable are older adults, especially those in longterm care settings. And people diagnosed with heart disease, lung disease and diabetes are twice as likely to develop serious outcomes from contracting the COVID19 virus, said Troy de Chabert-Schuster, State Director of the AARP in the Virgin Islands.

"In the U.S., the first deaths were Americans older than the age of 50, said Mr. de Chabert-Schuster. "The median age of patients (who passed) was 59."

The AARP is continuing to urge federal and local governments to provide "robust support and resources" and to give the public timely and accurate information. More detailed information about COVID19 can be obtained at [www.cdc.gov/coronavirus](http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus), Mr. de Chabert-Schuster said. He said the AARP is lobbying Congress to focus, in part, on two priority requests: first, creating greater access to tele-health (phone) options and ensuring that a future coronavirus vaccine is

affordably priced. “Affordable access to all is vital,” he said. “Vaccines are only effective when those who need them can afford them.”

V.I. Dept. of Human Services Commissioner, Kimberly Causey-Gomez, said the department has not halted visitation to any of the public long-term care facilities, or Homes for the Aged. “We are not restricting visitors,” the commissioner said. “However, we ask that if you have a cold, do not visit. If you are coughing when coming in, we will ask that you not visit.” The commissioner said closing down the senior centers has been a discussion had at the department, however a decision has not been made. She also said that the V.I. D.H.S. needed additional safety supplies such as masks.

"I don't know how many we have. I don't know if we have three or twenty-seven. We're definitely working with the Dept. of Health. I spoke with [D.O.H.] Commissioner Encarnacion earlier that we need additional supplies," Ms. Causey-Gomez said.

Officials provided the following resources for information:

### **The Department of Health**

For push notifications to your mobile phone about the administration’s response to coronavirus, text the word COVID19USVI to 888777 or visit the health department website at [www.doh.vi.gov/coronavirus](http://www.doh.vi.gov/coronavirus). Residents can also call the department at the following:

- St. Croix: 340-718-1311
- St. Thomas: 340-774-900 or 340-774-7477
- St. John: 340-776-6400
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“I want to assure you the D.O.H. will continue to prepare,” said Ms. Encarnacion. “Help us to protect our community by using precautions. Wash your hand regularly. If you have a fever, you are encouraged to stay home. Routinely and frequently clean all surfaces (in your home or workplace). ... Restaurants and hotels: The Division of Environmental Health will be visiting more often, bringing flyers and information and talking to you.”