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## Territory's Mental Health Response Under Scrutiny at St. Croix Crime Town Hall

Officials at a community forum discussed how police, health, and justice agencies handle mental health crises, the push to renovate Sea View into a care facility, and current protocols for involuntary commitment and competency hearings.

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Janeke Simon **March 27, 2025**

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Police Commissioner Mario Brooks and Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion speak during Wednesday's town hall at the Florence Williams Public Library in downtown Christiansted. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM

The official response to those who draw public attention while battling mental health challenges came under scrutiny during Wednesday's town hall meeting on crime and policing in the territory.

The meeting, the second of two convened by the WTJX in conjunction with the Senate Committee on Homeland Security, Justice and Public Safety, featured a discussion on the role law enforcement officials and other agencies play when it comes to assisting people who may be dealing with mental health crises or challenges.

A woman described her experience with such an individual who had allegedly attempted to break into her property. “The first step is always health, because the first step is prevention,” Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion responded.

“We want to make sure we have the amount of wraparound services we have and need within the territory,” she continued. If prevention fails, however, and involuntary commitment is the recourse, fire or police officers would be called to take action, Ms. Encarnacion advised.

A new behavioral health law is currently being examined by a multi-agency “task force”, said Ms. Encarnacion, “so they can better understand what the law is.” According to her, “the new law actually states that anybody that feels as though that person is at harm, to themselves or to others, can have the right to have that person involuntarily committed.”

However, “not every incident that they do rises to the level of a criminal act,” cautioned Police Commissioner Mario Brooks. “If it doesn’t, then there’s no reason to arrest them.” VIPD officers could, he said, take someone to the hospital if they need to be medicated. Interdepartmental training between the Department of Health and the VIPD on how to deal appropriately with such calls “should be coming online shortly,” the police commissioner said. However, he was careful to underscore that “the ones that do commit a crime, we will address them appropriately.”

A member of the community reiterated the importance of a residential facility where such individuals could have round the clock supervision. “I know we’ve been talking about that for about five years,” the woman said, but it’s truly essential. She drew attention to the intersection between those grappling with mental health challenges, individuals struggling with homelessness, and “crimes that happen around that whole issue,” arguing that more funds to help support residential facilities would ameliorate all three issues among the population. “I would love to see an era here on St. Croix where healing is a priority,” the woman concluded.

Ms. Encarnacion, in her response, said that the territory needs a transitional care facility. She reminded the public that the government has been working towards the purchase of the former nursing home Sea View, with a mind to renovate it “so that we can actually have a behavioral health facility there as well.” This, she said, would help to fill the gap that exists when an individual no longer needs to be hospitalized for a mental health condition, but still has needs that make them ineligible for release back into the community at large. “That’s one of the areas that I think we are missing,” Commissioner Encarnacion disclosed, again noting that those who have committed criminal acts would be turned over to the justice system.

If facing criminal charges, Attorney General Gordon Rhea outlined two possible outcomes. The defendant would first undergo a competency hearing, which would determine whether they are fit to stand trial. If found incompetent, they are detained and treated, Mr. Rhea explained. Subsequently, continued inability to reach competency could result in the defendant being committed to a mental institution.

Another possibility, Mr. Rhea shared, was an individual being found not guilty by reason of insanity. “Generally they will end up being committed until they can be returned to sanity.” Noting that “there’s a lot of different legal standards in all of that,” the attorney general echoed Commissioner Encarnacion’s lament over the lack of appropriate facilities. Nevertheless,

interagency work between the Department of Health, the V.I. Department of Justice, the VIPD and the Bureau of Corrections continues, in an attempt to “put together a system where we can actually house people, at least during that initial phase” of attempting to restore individuals to competency. “I don't want to give all the secrets away, but I think we're going to get there in the next few months," he said.

The challenge, Mr. Rhea outlined, was to provide a secure facility that does not feel like a prison. “Since they're being held because of a mental illness rather than because of any conviction for a crime, it isn't right to hold them in a prison, and they need to be in a place where they can be treated,” he said. The only option currently is to house such individuals off island, “but the expense of that is tremendous,” Mr. Rhea noted. “So we're looking for some systems that will not only get the job done, but will also save our government and us a lot of money.”

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