

The Virgin Islands Consortium

USVI COVID-19 Hotlines are Testing the Department of Health's Ability to Adequately and Quickly Respond to Potential Cases

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The V.I. Department of Health coronavirus hotlines for St. Croix and St. Thomas/St. John are geared toward residents who believe they were exposed to the virus and display symptoms of the COVID-19 illness.

Instead, the phone lines have been flooded with calls from people looking to vent or give advice about how local and national government should respond to the spread of the virus.

When the two hotline numbers are tied up with those calls, residents with legitimate health concerns have been forced to leave phone messages and wait — in some instances, for hours — for a return call from a public health worker.

By Wednesday morning, the surge in calls to the Department of Health outpaced the D.O.H.'s ability to respond to everyone who calls right away. "If we are getting a high volume of calls, callers may have to leave a contact number. We will return when staff is available to ask the series of questions and provide instructions," said Jahnesta Ritter, director of public relations for the V.I. Dept. of Health.

Staffing a disease crisis hotline is challenging, experts say, because calls can spike dramatically after the phone numbers are repeated by government officials or published by media outlets. Without sufficient staff to cover those call surges, people trying to find out if they should be tested because of fever or travel to COVID-19 "hot spots" have had to leave phone messages. And wait.

"Previously we had 24/7 staffing," Ms. Ritter said. The hotlines are answered by live call-takers during regular business hours. After hours, the calls go to a staffer's cell phone, she said.

The Consortium inquired about the number of phone calls received since the hotlines were set up, and how many of those calls were related to legitimate, personal health concerns, and how many of those callers were referred for COVID-19 screening. As of Wednesday night, the VIDOH had not provided a response.

Ms. Ritter urged the public to use the hotlines for reporting potential cases, where symptoms include fever, cough, shortness of breath, and travel to areas that have had widespread, ongoing transmission, such as China, Italy, Iran, South Korea and some parts of the U.S. mainland.

Public health experts, locally, have said the current risk of transmission in the Virgin Islands is low for most residents, but precautions should still be taken to avoid transmission within the community.

A person may also get COVID-19 by touching a surface that has the virus on it and then touching their own mouth, nose or eyes.

To avoid the virus and help prevent its spread, Department of Health officials recommend these steps:

- Avoid close contact with sick people.
- While sick, limit contact with others as much as possible.
- Stay home if sick.
- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when coughing or sneezing and discard the tissue. Wash hands immediately. Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth.
- Clean and disinfect surfaces and objects that may be contaminated with germs.
- Wash hands often with soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand rub with at least 60 percent alcohol.

Older adults and people with underlying health issues are particularly vulnerable and should avoid crowded places and non-essential air travel to decrease their risk for virus transmission.

COVID-19 spreads mostly between people who are in close contact via respiratory droplets when an infected person coughs or sneezes.

Someone who has contracted COVID-19 is most likely to spread it when they are most symptomatic, meaning they are more likely to spread it to others when they are sick.

When people are sick is when they are most likely to call the COVID-19 hotline. Immediate guidance for those callers can, potentially, help prevent the further spread of the virus in the territory.