

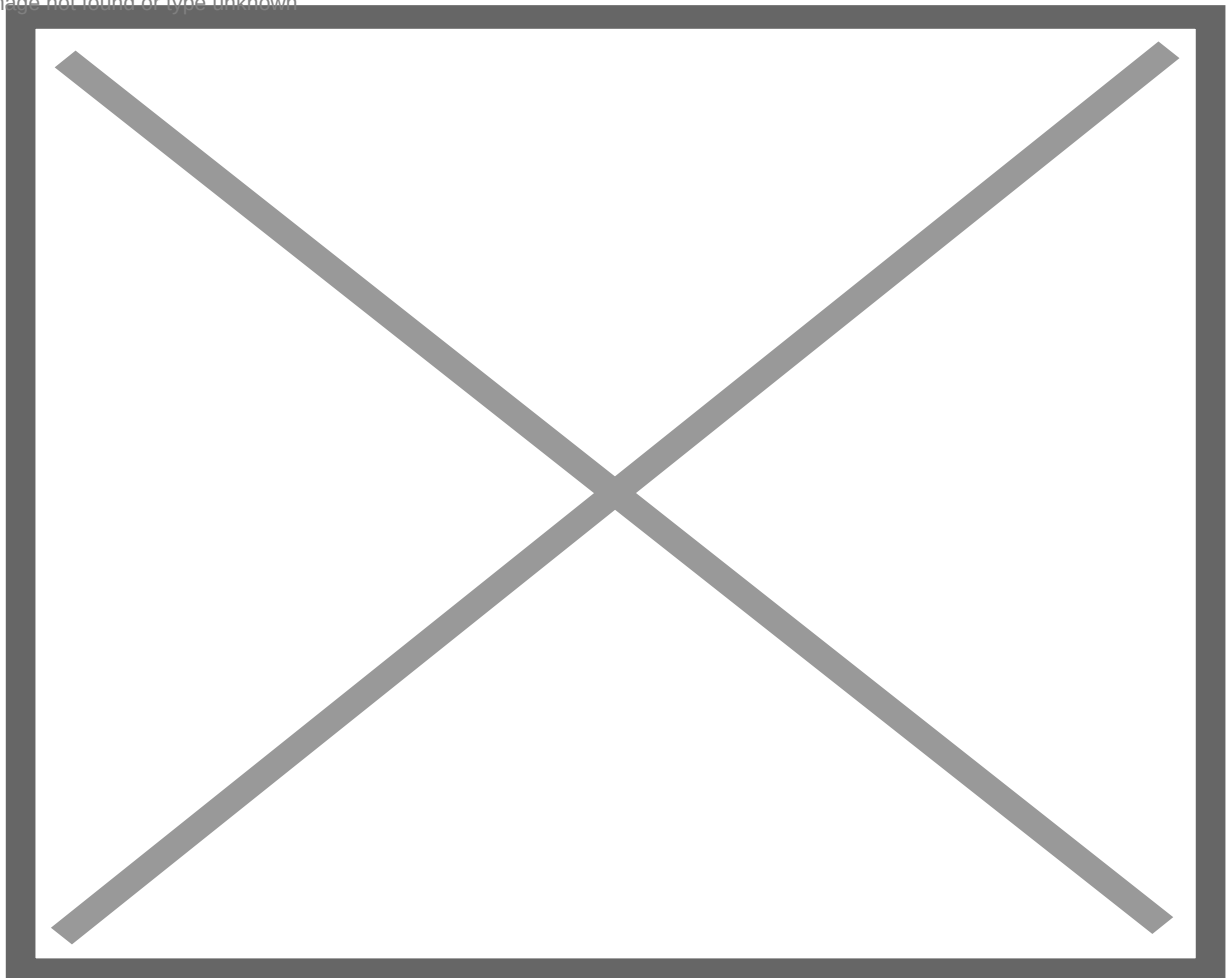
New Office, Same Mission: Diabetes Center Appeals for \$500K to Continue Lifesaving Programs for Diabetes and Pre-Diabetes Patients

With 68% of patients on Medicare or Medicaid and 10% uninsured, VIDCOE says its future depends on new funding as ARPA support ends; the center's programs include childhood screening, diabetes prevention, mobile outreach, and free health fairs.

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VIDCOE employees served residents at the Saturday grand opening, which doubled as a free health fair. By. VIDCOE.

Patients with diabetes now have better access to specialized care following the opening of a new office for the Virgin Islands Diabetes Center of Excellence (VIDCOE) at the Sion Farm Shopping

Center, Suite 1, in Christiansted. The center's leadership held its grand opening and annual Free Diabetes Health Fair on Saturday, combining both events to celebrate a new chapter in community-based care.

Patients were previously seen at a location in La Grande Princesse that lacked ADA compliance, requiring individuals with mobility challenges to climb stairs. "That serves as an impediment for them," said Dr. Julia Sheen, Executive Director of VIDCOE.

The move to the new facility was funded through Community Project Funding and a congressional appropriation. The health fair received support from multiple sources, including VIDCOE, the University of the Virgin Islands' Center of Excellence in Developmental Disabilities, the Office of the Governor, and the Virgin Islands Legislature.



Dr. Julia Sheen, center, at the new VIDCOE facility in the Sion Farm Shopping Center. She is flanked by Sen. Angel Bolques Jr., left, and Sen. Ray Fonseca, right. (Credit: VIDCOE)

VIDCOE also operates on St. Thomas, where services are offered from the fifth floor of the Schneider Regional Medical Center.

During the Saturday event, the center provided free foot exams, retinal eye exams, and endocrinology consultations, services that are normally out of reach for uninsured or underinsured individuals. According to Dr. Sheen, 68% of the center's patients are covered by Medicare or Medicaid, and 10% have no health insurance at all. "A lot of people just can't afford it, and so we offer this service at no charge to the community," she said.



VIDCOE employees served residents at the Saturday grand opening, which doubled as a free health fair. (Credit: VIDCOE)

The eye exams were made possible by a retinal imaging camera purchased with Community Project Funds. Demand was high—100 people were waiting for eye exams during Saturday’s health fair. Last year’s event, held on St. Thomas, saw more than 200 people served.

Sheen emphasized that diabetes patients require frequent monitoring of their A1C, cholesterol, and blood pressure levels, and that too many are going without annual specialist visits. “As a diabetic patient, you’re supposed to be getting your annual foot exam, eye exam, and see an endocrinologist every year.”

Legislative Push for Sustained Funding

The health fair took place as senators consider a bill (No. 36-0093) to appropriate \$500,000 to fund VIDCOE operations. A hearing is scheduled for July 31, and Sheen says passage of the bill is critical. “Our funding is through ARPA (American Rescue Plan Act of 2021). And of course, ARPA funds were one and done... at some point we are going to run out.”

She noted that she has testified before the Legislature four to five times requesting funding. “We were awarded \$200,000 one year, and they reduced it to \$100,000,” Sheen said. “I’m hoping they will pass this bill, find the funding for it, and pass it so that they can consistently fund the center.”



The grand opening event featured a ribbon cutting at VIDCOE’s new St. Croix office, joined by lawmakers and community partners. (Credit: VIDCOE)

Sheen added that the population VIDCOE serves is among the most at risk in the territory. “They are the ones with the highest hemoglobin A1C. They have diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol. They’re overweight. They’re the sickest population we have in the territory, so we can’t afford to turn them away.”

Specialty care is costly, she noted, and many specialists do not accept Medicare or Medicaid because reimbursement rates are too low. “These funds will go a long way in subsidizing the care of that particular population,” Sheen said.

Preventative Programs and Early Intervention

VIDCOE is also launching several new initiatives:

- In partnership with the Bennie Benjamin Foundation and the Department of Education, a childhood diabetes prevention program will begin in August. The effort focuses on early screening for fourth and fifth grade students to identify cases of diabetes and intervene before complications develop.
- A Diabetes Mobile Health Initiative has already started, sending VIDCOE professionals into the community to identify undiagnosed and uncontrolled cases. Sheen underscored the financial implications of complications: annual management of diabetes costs around \$9,600, but dialysis treatment costs can soar to \$90,000 per year, and amputations cost between \$30,000 to \$60,000 per procedure. “Not to mention the thousands of dollars that you might spend if you lose your vision, have a heart attack, or stroke,” she added.
- A Prevent Type 2 Diabetes Program is also underway. The 12-month initiative supports individuals diagnosed with pre-diabetes. Participants meet weekly, receiving instruction on healthy eating, physical activity, sleep hygiene, and more. The program’s first cohort is expected to graduate in October.
- The center also offers monthly diabetes nutrition and medication management classes, part of its mission to serve as a patient-centered medical home for individuals living with diabetes.

“If you have diabetes, or if you’re newly diagnosed and you need help administering insulin, understanding your medications, or just learning how to cope, come to VIDCOE,” said Dr. Sheen. “We’re here to support you.” For more information, the public is encouraged to call 340-208-0260.