

Test Results for 30 Suspected Cases Pending; Dept. of Health to Ramp Up Testing in Two Weeks; CDC Dispatches Physicians to Assist With Contact Tracing, Surveillance

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Public health officials hope to begin local diagnostic testing for the coronavirus (COVID-19), maybe as early as next week, meaning more carriers of the potentially deadly virus can be identified sooner and placed under quarantine, said Department of Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion.

“We have the testing capabilities so that we can test, as of Monday, 30 (people) per day,” the commissioner said. “And we are looking forward to testing up to 1,000 per day within the next two weeks.” The health department continues to follow federal Centers for Disease Control and

Prevention (CDC) guidelines, which emphasize testing those who display symptoms of COVID-19 infection — fever, persistent cough, recent travel to a coronavirus hotspots in the states or abroad, or close contact with someone who has tested positive for COVID-19 infection. The health department’s capacity to test the public more broadly will increase when additional test kits are in hand, she said. The testing kits will provide results as quickly as 24 hours for “priority” samples, Ms. Encarnacion said.

Gov. Albert Bryan and the government’s coronavirus response team briefed the public again this week on the latest measures taken to stem the rapidly spreading COVID-19 in the territory. As of Wednesday afternoon, the number of confirmed cases remained at 17 with nine cases on St. Croix and eight on St. Thomas. Sixteen of the people who tested positive for being infected with the coronavirus are at their homes, under quarantine, Mr. Bryan said. The first diagnoses patient has recovered, he said.

To date, 103 people have been tested by the CDC, according to the Department of Health’s Division of Epidemiology. Fifty-six came back with negative results. Thirty-six of those were tests from St. Thomas; 18 tests were from St. Croix and two were from St. John. There have been no positive tests from St. John or Water Island. Results are pending for 30 tests, Ms. Encarnacion said.

On St. Thomas, traffic is visibly reduced and non-essential businesses — jewelry stores, apparel stores etc. — are largely shuttered in places like Havensight and the Waterfront. All bars were ordered closed last week, and restaurants that remain open are serving take-out food and drinks. Ms. Encarnacion said two bars that violated the government’s directive to limit their operations to no more than 10 patrons at a time were shutdown, and a third venue was ordered closed on Wednesday.

The proven means of slowing the spread of the virus — washing your hands frequently and staying at least six feet from other individuals — is being practiced widely across the territory. But not everyone is following the advice of the public health experts. Asked about those who ignore the “stay at home” or social distancing order, Mr. Bryan said imposing a curfew in the territory is too draconian a step, at the moment. “Short of martial law, there is nothing we can do,” Mr. Bryan said. “What we are trying to do is to get people (exercise) best practices and to stop mass gathering where you will be able to spread this thing to 20, 30, 40 people at a time. ... We are asking people to use common sense.”

Commissioner Encarnacion said local spread of the disease “is ongoing.” The disease spreads easiest when a carrier coughs or sneezes, sending respiratory droplets into the air and onto other people and surfaces. “However, a person does not have to be sick to have COVID-19, or to spread it. Always take precautions when you are around other people.”

Hunker Down if You are Stranded in the V.I.; Quarantine Yourself if You Travel to the V.I. From New York

Government House advised tourists last week to leave as quickly as possible, but some hotels still have guests from the states or elsewhere who have been unable to leave because airlines have reduced the number of flights to and from the territory. Hotels cannot accommodate new arrivals to the island, though the airports and ports remain open. Travelers who arrive from New York — now the being called the epicenter of coronavirus in the U.S. — are being urged to isolate themselves from others for at least two weeks, whether they display symptoms of COVID-19 disease or not.

Help is on the Way

At the request of the territory's chief epidemiologist, Dr. Esther Ellis, the CDC dispatched two physicians to assist in the surveillance, sampling and contact-tracing. Additionally, federal public health crisis response grant is now in hand and will be used to purchase swabs for patient screening, protective gear for staff that come in contact with sick or suspected coronavirus carriers, COVID-19 education and other supplies needed for the COVID-19 response, said Ms. Encarnacion.

Voluntary Registry for Seniors

The Department of Human Services is maintaining a registry for people 60-years-old or older who live alone, or people with disabilities, who may need assistance. For information or to voluntarily register, contact the DHS at 340-774-0930, ext 4018 on St. Thomas; 340-773-6630 on St. Croix, or 340-776-6334 on St. John.

VITEMA Hotline for Non-Medical Questions About COVID-19 Impact on the Islands

Beginning Thursday, the V.I. Territorial Emergency Management Agency will operate a hotline for Virgin Islanders to call with non-medical questions regarding COVID-19 impact on the territory. Staff from the departments of Education, Human Resources, Tourism and Licensing and Consumer Affairs will be on hand to provide information. The VITEMA COVID-19 hotline number is 340-715-6834. It will operate from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. beginning Thursday, March 26th.