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Health Department Marks Suicide Prevention Month With Candlelight Walks, New Podcast Series for Gen Z

The V.I. DOH is marking Suicide Prevention Awareness Month with remembrance walks, candlelight ceremonies, and a new Gen Z-focused mental health podcast series, aiming to break stigma, raise awareness, and provide critical support across the territory.

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The V.I. Department of Health's Behavioral Health Division is observing Suicide Prevention Awareness Month with a slate of remembrance events and the launch of a new initiative aimed at addressing mental health challenges among youth and young adults.

On September 10 in St. Croix, and again on September 17 in St. Thomas, the department will host a Suicide Prevention Walk followed by a Candlelight and Lantern Release Ceremony. The first

walk begins at the former Charles Harwood Memorial Complex modulars and proceeds to the Christiansted Bypass lookout. The second will start at Schneider Regional Medical Center and end at the Charlotte Amalie Waterfront promenade. Both events, scheduled for 6 p.m., will feature reflection, remembrance, and community solidarity for those affected by suicide.

The events come against a backdrop of local tragedy. In 2024, three young Virgin Islanders lost their lives to suicide, leaving families and communities in mourning. In response, the Department of Health is reinforcing its outreach with activities designed to provide hope, strengthen connections, and inform residents about available resources.

Commissioner Justa Encarnacion noted the importance of breaking cultural barriers around mental health. “Here in the Virgin Islands, we don’t always talk about mental health or suicide prevention — and that silence can become stigma,” she said. “But help is available, and suicide is preventable. This month we are reinforcing our commitment to opening conversations and making sure that persons know they are seen, valued, and not alone.”

The remembrance walks are paired with a forward-looking project: the department’s first-ever Mental Health Radio Podcast Series. Launching September 18 in partnership with ROE FM 101.3 and Media One Productions LLC, the series will focus on Gen Z. Episodes will feature mental health experts alongside youth voices, offering tools and resources for parents, teachers, counselors, and community leaders.

Deputy Commissioner for Behavioral Health Renan Steele said the approach combines remembrance with proactive outreach. “The candlelight walks and lantern releases are about honoring the lives we have lost and standing with those still struggling,” he explained. “At the same time, we know that prevention starts with conversation. That is why we are launching the podcast series—to create safe, open spaces where mental health is talked about, understood, and embraced as part of overall wellness. Our Gen Z youth deserve to be heard, supported, and empowered to thrive.”

Behavioral Health Director Gesil Ramos highlighted the broader goal of community support. “Raising awareness about suicide is not just about prevention, it’s about reminding every person that their life matters, hope is real, and help is always within reach,” she said. “Together, we can break the silence, reduce stigma, and create a community where no one feels alone.”

Encarnacion also pointed to the pressures many young people face, from surviving two major hurricanes to navigating COVID-19 disruptions and the stresses of daily life. “Many of us, especially Gen Z, have carried the weight of two major hurricanes, the disruption and isolation of COVID-19, and daily pressures that can feel very overwhelming. We must give them the tools, the support, and the assurance that they are not alone. Talking about mental health is not a weakness; it is a step toward healing,” she said.

The radio podcast series is part of a broader campaign the department intends to expand in the coming months to encourage ongoing, open discussions about mental health and suicide prevention.

For immediate support, residents can call or text 988 or use the chat service at 988lifeline.org to connect with trained crisis counselors. The lifeline provides 24/7 assistance for those experiencing suicidal thoughts, substance use crises, emotional distress, or other mental health challenges. In situations of imminent self-harm risk, residents should call 911.

