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Ground Broken on Dr. Donna M. Christian Christensen Health Center as Leaders Honor Her Lasting Legacy

Territorial leaders, healthcare officials and builders gathered on St. Croix to launch construction of the new Dr. Donna M. Christian Christensen Health Center, honoring her legacy while replacing the long-serving Charles Harewood Memorial Complex.

Health / **Published On December 17, 2025 06:28 AM /**

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Territorial leaders, project contractors, and honoree Dr. Donna M. Christian Christensen take part in the ceremonial groundbreaking for the new Dr. Donna M. Christian Christensen Health Center on St. Croix. By. DEAR PRODUCTIONS.

ST. CROIX — The life, leadership, and lasting impact of Dr. Donna M. Christian Christensen took center stage Tuesday as territorial officials, healthcare leaders, and community figures

gathered to officially break ground on the new health center that will bear her name, marking a pivotal moment in St. Croix's public health future.

The ceremony, while focused on the forward-looking facility, opened with recognition of the legacy it replaces. Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion paid tribute to Charles Harewood, whose namesake memorial complex served St. Croix for nearly 75 years. The Charles Harewood Memorial Complex, she said, has been "a symbol of service, care and community for countless families on St. Croix," and its enduring influence continues to shape healthcare delivery on the island. "It is upon that foundation that we now move forward," Encarnacion said.

Commissioner Encarnacion also reflected on Dr. Christensen's leadership style during her tenure as a public health strategist, describing a "soft, strategic approach" that ensured her ideas were heard and her guidance effectively delivered. That approach, she noted, defined Dr. Christensen's decades of service "as a physician, a public health leader, and the first woman to serve the Virgin Islands as Delegate to Congress."

As a congresswoman, Encarnacion said, "Dr. Christiansen advanced transformative national conversations on health, equity, minority health, and the needs of the U.S. territories," adding that her advocacy brought increased federal attention and resources to issues central to the territory's wellbeing.

Attention then turned to the scope and scale of the project itself. James Benton, principal of the Consigli-Benton joint venture responsible for construction, described the health center as a five-level building with a mechanical penthouse that will become "one of the largest structural steel projects ever undertaken on St. Croix outside the oil refinery." Sustainability and resilience are central to the design, he said, noting the installation of two 1,500-kilowatt generators to "ensure continuous power for this incredible facility," along with a full building automation and intelligent lighting control system.

"This project is personal...this is our home, and we know firsthand just how vital a new welcoming environment to inspire our community's health truly is once complete," Benton said.

Steve Jackson of Flad Architects detailed the design philosophy behind the new health center, explaining that the team worked to "create a building that feels rooted here one that belongs in St. Croix." The design incorporates Crucian heritage through materials and visual language, including limestone, bright and vibrant colors, and patterns inspired by Madras. These elements, Jackson emphasized, "are not decorative afterthoughts," but rather "meaningful expressions of identity, pride and place."

Jackson added that the building maintains a strong connection to the surrounding environment, "acknowledging the islands' geography and deep relationship between land, sea and community life," while balancing historical legacy with a forward-looking vision. "This facility is being built to serve the community when it is needed most," he said.

As remarks shifted back to Dr. Christensen's personal and professional legacy, Senate President Milton Potter underscored the values that have defined her career. "She taught us that the true measure of a society is found not in wealth or prestige, but in how well it nurtures and cares for its people," he said.

Lieutenant Governor Tregenza Roach echoed that sentiment, telling Dr. Christensen, who attended the ceremony, that he has always known her as "a person who has been guided by the heart."

Governor Albert Bryan Jr. reflected on the symbolism of replacing the old facility with a new one, acknowledging that the decision to demolish the Charles Harewood Memorial Complex had faced resistance. “Even in nature, the forest has to burn down for new growth,” Bryan said, describing the project as an act of renewal. “As we come to this place now to build something new, to grow something from the ashes, we all have to be proud of what it is.”

The governor also highlighted Dr. Christensen’s influence beyond medicine, pointing to her impact in national politics. “The doors that she opened for us, they were national doors,” he said, recalling the guidance she provided to emerging Virgin Islands leaders navigating Washington, D.C. “And even when she was not there, her legacy and her reputation guided us.”

Rather than seeing her name solely as a building designation, Bryan said he hopes Virgin Islanders recognize Dr. Christensen’s legacy as that of “a person that has done an incredible amount of work for the Virgin Islands and where we stand today.”