

The Virgin Islands Consortium

DEA Says 'We're Not Going to Stop Until Zero' as Fentanyl Free USVI Initiative Launches

The DEA said fentanyl remains the nation's deadliest drug threat, citing nearly 80,000 U.S. overdose deaths in the past year, while local health officials reported 23 overdose cases in the USVI over three years, all surviving.

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Evan Martinez, special agent with the DEA's Caribbean Division, speaks at a podium during the launch of the Fentanyl Free USVI Initiative, flanked by territorial officials including health commissioner and police commissioners. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM.

The Drug Enforcement Agency's Caribbean Division, working with local partners, has launched the Fentanyl Free USVI Initiative, a program that will "protect the U.S. Virgin Islands."

The initiative aligns with the DEA's mission of "strengthening its fight against the deadly synthetic opioid crisis." That's according to Tony Velazquez, public affairs specialist. He described the initiative as a "comprehensive enforcement and public awareness initiative focused on protecting lives and communities throughout the U.S. Virgin Islands."

Deaths related to drug overdoses are far from novel in the United States. Provisional counts from the Centers for Disease Control report 79,159 reported deaths by overdose during the 12 months ending January 2025. The predicted number of deaths for that timeframe is slightly higher, at 79,896. Fentanyl remains at the forefront of the opioid crisis.

Partner agencies are "deeply concerned" about the "growing threat" that the drug poses to the safety of the USVI, and Mr. Velasquez said that fentanyl is "the most lethal drug threat facing the United States."

With fentanyl classed as the "deadliest drug threat our nation has ever faced," the DEA's Caribbean Division is "aggressively targeting to prevent fentanyl from reaching the U.S. Virgin Islands and its neighbors," Mr. Velasquez stated.

Michael Miranda, special agent in charge of the Caribbean Division, confirmed that the DEA has noticed an "uptick in fentanyl." The initiative, he said, adopts a "multifaceted approach." While the DEA has observed a "downward trend in fentanyl deaths," Mr. Miranda promised "we're not going to stop until we get to zero."

The Fentanyl Free USVI Initiative hinges on enforcement, education, and partnerships. On the enforcement front, Mr. Miranda affirmed that the DEA will "continue to attack the Mexican cartels that have flooded our region, have flooded the United States with fentanyl."

On the education front, he emphasized the importance of raising awareness on the "dangers of fentanyl," particularly within youthful audiences.

"We're telling the public today we need to remain on high alert," said Evan Martinez, assistant special agent.

Though the initiative was launched on Tuesday, local partnerships have been ongoing in the background. For Commissioner of Health Justa Encarnacion, the opioid crisis is a public health emergency. The Department of Health, through its Behavioral Health Division, is focused on public education on the use of Narcan, a medication used to reverse opioid overdoses. Of the 23 overdose cases in the territory in the last 3 years, all the individuals survived.

DOH, however, wants to focus on the avoidance of drug use as well. The Department and its partners have been steadily working in the territory's schools to "build that trusting relationship and reduce the use of opioid throughout the territory."

She warned that drug use, even in isolated instances, can be damaging. “Your psychosis actually can be damaged for a very long period of time or forever,” Ms. Encarnacion said.

Mr. Martinez, too, noted that individuals may be unaware that they are using fentanyl, which can be fatal in even extremely small doses. That, he said, is “the thing that separates this from all the other horrific drugs that we’ve seen before.”

The Virgin Islands Police Department is also on board with the initiative. Commissioner Mario Brooks shared that VIPD will soon share information “as to what the enforcement will look like.”

The success of the Fentanyl Free USVI Initiative relies on community involvement. Parents, educators, health care professionals, faith leaders, and community groups are encouraged by Mr. Velasquez to “play an active role in prevention.”

“Even if we save one, it’s all worth it, but our goal is to save as many lives as possible,” said Rodney Querrard, a drug intelligence officer.