

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Health, Emergency Leaders Meet With Air Force Southern to Strengthen Public Health Preparedness in USVI

Senior officials from DOH and VITEMA met with Air Force Southern medical and logistics leaders on St. Croix to share information, address island-specific emergency response challenges, and strengthen civilian-military coordination for future disasters.

Community Center / **Published On February 06, 2026 08:14 AM /**

Staff Consortium **February 06, 2026**



Senior leaders from the V.I. Department of Health and the V.I. Territorial Emergency Management Agency met Thursday with medical and logistics officials from Air Force Southern to strengthen coordination around public health preparedness and emergency

response in the territory.

According to the Department of Health, the engagement was held on St. Croix and centered on information-sharing and strengthening relationships between civilian and military partners, with a focus on the unique challenges of emergency response in island and Caribbean settings.

“This engagement reflects the importance of strong partnerships in protecting public health, particularly in island and Caribbean settings,” said DOH Commissioner Justa Encarnacion. “We were happy to share our experiences, lessons learned, and operational realities.”

Air Force Southern, or AFSOUTH, is the U.S. Air Force component of U.S. Southern Command. SOUTHCOM oversees U.S. military operations and security cooperation with partner nations in the Caribbean, Central America, and South America, including humanitarian assistance, disaster response, and medical readiness. AFSOUTH plans and executes Air Force activities supporting those missions, including aeromedical evacuation, disaster response, and coordination with civilian and international partners to strengthen regional health and emergency response capabilities.

The visiting delegation was led by AFSOUTH Surgeon General Col. Brian Gavitt and Deputy Surgeon General Lt. Col. Erica Lopez, along with TSgt. Clarence Hall, a medical logistician with U.S. Southern Command. The meeting provided an opportunity for open dialogue on how civilian and military agencies coordinate during major emergencies.

Joining Commissioner Encarnacion were Daryl Jaschen, director of VITEMA, and several senior leaders from the Department of Health, including Assistant Commissioner Reuben Molloy; Dr. Esther Ellis, territorial epidemiologist; Aesha Rivers, director of the Public Health Preparedness Division; and Jacqueline Greenidge-Payne, Emergency Medical Services for Children Program Director. Participating virtually were Dr. Tai Hunte-Ceasar, the department’s chief medical officer, and Stephany Vento, regional emergency coordinator for the Administration for Strategic Preparedness and Response within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

During the engagement, Health Department leadership presented an overview of the department’s public health mission and its lead role under Emergency Support Function 8, which covers public health and medical services during emergencies, according to the release. Presentations highlighted the department’s responsibilities in supporting hospitals, managing limited resources, and addressing the operational complexities of delivering care across a multi-island health system.

Key discussion areas included patient movement and tracking, infectious disease preparedness, and coordination during large-scale emergencies such as hurricanes or disease outbreaks. The Department of Health also discussed the use of federal assets, including the Joint Patient Assessment and Tracking System, when appropriate, to support medical evacuation and continuity of care during disasters.

AFSOUTH representatives also received a briefing on the territory’s Emergency Medical Services for Children program, including planning efforts for an upcoming full-scale emergency exercise known as Operation Guardian Angels. The exercise is intended to

test and strengthen pediatric emergency response and coordination among territorial and federal partners.

The meeting concluded with participants identifying potential areas for continued collaboration. Officials on both sides emphasized the importance of ongoing communication and relationship-building as critical components of preparedness for future public health and emergency response challenges.

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