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Opinion: Good Coronavirus Data Are Vital to Understanding The Disease's Lethal Spread, So V.I. Government Math Errors are Unacceptable

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From left: VITEMA Director Daryl Jaschen, DOH Epidemiologist Esther Ellis, DOH Commissioner Justa Encarnacion, Governor Bryan and Lt. Gov. Roach By. ERNICE GILBERT/VI CONSORTIUM

Sunday's coronavirus death is a tragic turning point in the fight against the deadly disease in the Virgin Islands. The pathogen has stolen a life in our community. And now the threat is real.

So arming the public with accurate, timely and complete data about the trajectory of this lethal respiratory disease is more urgent today than ever. Good information from government experts is essential if Virgin Islanders are to make smart choices about how meticulously they self-isolate to

protect themselves and the people around them.

The Bryan-Roach administration knew this grievous day was coming. Still, it was caught flat-footed on Sunday and, unfortunately, struggled with clarity and accuracy.

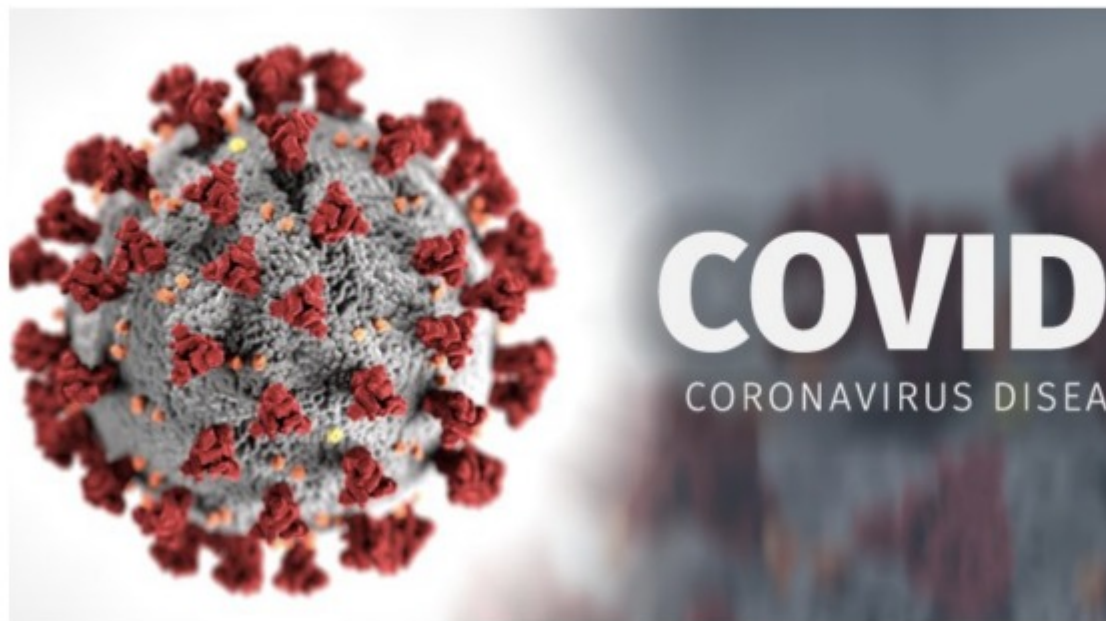
Take the information provided via text messaging online early Sunday by the Virgin Islands Health Department and the V.I. Emergency Management Agency. Basically, the health department, through VITEMA's mobile phone alert system, confirmed what had already made the rounds on social media. No additional information was offered because, the administration said, the next of kin of the victim had not been notified.

By mid-morning, the VIDOH website updated the public with the latest coronavirus testing data—the fatality, new confirmed cases, new negative test results, pending test results.

The statistics, however, were confusing. No, more than confusing. In at least one key instance, the numbers were simply wrong.

According to the department, laboratory results were pending for 18 tests. But the website goes on to list 15 pending results from St. Thomas; 10 pending results from St. Croix and 3 from St. John. That's a total of 28 pending cases - not 18 (see screenshot below).

Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)



The U.S. Virgin Islands is reinforcing critical public health messaging like symptom-monitoring, in and ways to avoid the spread of disease into our territory. By following the health department's , keep yourself and your family safe if you come into contact with someone with COVID-19 or other pathogens like the flu.

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PUI update (266 CUMULATIVE TOTAL):

Positive: 42 (28 STT; 12 STX; 2 STJ)

- STX: 9 travel; 1 community; 1 contact with confirmed case; 1 under investigation
- STT: 7 travel; 9 community; 9 contact with confirmed case; 3 under investigation
- STJ: 2 travel; 0 community; 0 contact with confirmed case; 0 under investigation

Negative: 206 (121 STT; 77 STX; 8 STJ)

Pending: 18 (15 STT; 10 STX; 3 STJ)

The VITEMA text message alert sent out Sunday morning also stated 18 test results were pending, and on the Dept. of Health's Facebook page, it said those pending results included 15 from St. Thomas, 3 pending from St. John and 0 pending cases from St. Croix.

So, uh... Which is it? Are results pending for 18 tests? Or 28? Are 10 people on St. Croix waiting for test results? Or zero?

It should be noted that the Consortium placed calls and text messages Sunday evening to administration officials to inform them of the data errors and to seek comment. None of the calls or text messages were returned. Presumably the next of kin to deceased was contacted by Sunday evening.

Granted, the numbers change locally and globally at lightening speed when it comes to this pandemic. Guidance from the experts shifts. And people make mistakes.

But math errors are unacceptable when it comes to COVID-19.

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