

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Bryan to Reopen Beaches Monday; Second Coronavirus Death is a 72-Year-Old St. Thomas Woman

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A barren Frederiksted Beach on Easter Sunday, 2020. Governor Bryan had ordered the beaches closed, he said, to prevent mass gatherings during the Easter Weekend. By. CRUSELDA ROBERTS FOR VI CONSORTIUM

A second person infected with COVID-19 disease caused by the coronavirus has died on St. Thomas, the V.I. Department of Health announced on Friday. The deceased is a 72-year-old woman who had been hospitalized for the past two weeks at the Schneider Regional Medical Center, said Gov. Albert Bryan at the regular Government House COVID-19 update.

VI Department of Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion said the deceased contracted the virus through community spread, which means health officials do not know exactly how or where the infection occurred.

The total number of positive cases of COVID-19 remained at 51 as of Friday afternoon. Negative test results climbed to 373. A total of 458 people have been tested, according to the VIDOH. Thirty-four test results are pending. The number of tests administered increased by 27 over the last 24 hours.

While the number of positive cases has remained stable over the last six days, Mr. Bryan said the territory has not reached the expected peak of the spread. "We were always predicting that the surge would be a little bit later. ... We're not really safe until our feeder cities - Miami, New York, North Carolina, Atlanta, New Jersey start to peak."

Both tragic COVID-19 deaths in the territory involved elderly victims. An 85-year-old St. Thomas man who had underlying health conditions died of coronavirus-related illness earlier this month. He died at home, and was not tested for exposure to the virus until after his death. Health officials were unaware of his condition, so he was not part of COVID-19 testing and tracking efforts.

Health authorities are turning greater attention to outreach and education for the territory's senior citizens and their caregivers or family members, urging them to adhere to social distancing practices and to contact the VIDOH if they display the symptoms of high fever, shortness of breath and coughing. "We are working alongside the VI National Guard and the VI Department of Human Services who have a log of all the seniors. We are working with them, going into the neighborhoods, ensuring that we project the message to them," Ms. Encarnacion said.

Mr. Bryan said the government has been identifying exactly where seniors live, based on GPS coordinates, so that first responders are better able to locate seniors during health emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic, or natural disasters.

Beaches Reopening

Beaches are expected to reopen to the public on Monday, Mr. Bryan said. He cautioned people, however, that water quality tests would not be complete for the Monday reopening. The quality test results won't be available until Thursday. The laboratory where water samples are tested has a backlog, meaning it will be later in the week before the territory's results are returned.

Mr. Bryan confirmed that the closures two weeks ago were largely to prevent camping on the beach during the Easter weekend — a longstanding tradition among Virgin Islands families, particularly on St. Croix. Beaches heavily populated with campers was a COVID-19 risk the government didn't want to take, he said.

"There is a strong family tradition in the VI of going to the beach during Easter vacation, especially on St. Croix... The tradition is so strong that people wouldn't be able to resist the urge to go camping, have parties, food. Just to eliminate that risk, we made sure we did this... Our concern wasn't so much on transmission on the beach but because we were going through that long weekend and everybody was going to be at home and be bored. We knew what the beaches could look like."

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