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DOH to Announce Major Advancement in USVI 988 Services Amid Effort to Establish First Local Crisis Call Center

Federal and territorial records show the USVI has been building its first local 988 crisis call center after years of routing callers off-island. DOH will announce a major advancement Tuesday alongside VITEMA, with 24/7 crisis response at the center.

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Employees work inside a mainland 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline call center, illustrating the type of locally based crisis-response operation the U.S. Virgin Islands is preparing to build.

The U.S. Virgin Islands appears poised to begin locally handling 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline calls for the first time, marking a significant shift from a system in which residents could dial the national three-digit number but were connected to crisis counselors outside the territory.

The V.I. Department of Health announced Friday that it will hold a press conference Tuesday, Sept. 8, to announce what it describes as a major advancement in the territory's 988 services and the continued development of a more coordinated behavioral-health crisis-response system.

Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion is scheduled to make the announcement alongside Deputy Commissioner of Behavioral Health Renan Steele and V.I. Territorial Emergency Management Agency Director Daryl Jaschen at the Department of Health's offices in Estate Diamond, St. Croix.

DOH has not publicly disclosed the precise advancement ahead of the press conference. But a review by the Consortium of federal health records, territorial procurement documents and the government's multi-year effort to establish an on-island 988 operation strongly points to the launch of the territory's first local 988 crisis call center.

USVI Has Been Working Toward a Local Center for Years

The distinction is important because 988 itself is not new to the Virgin Islands.

The national Suicide & Crisis Lifeline became accessible through the three-digit 988 number in the territory on July 16, 2022. Since then, residents experiencing suicidal thoughts, mental-health distress, substance-use crises or other emotional difficulties have been able to call or text 988 for assistance.

What the territory has lacked is its own crisis center to answer those contacts locally.

A 2024 report submitted through the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration was explicit: "No call centers in the Virgin Islands at this time." The report added that the territory was in the process of creating a local 988 call center.

That effort accelerated late last year.

On Dec. 15, 2025, the V.I. Department of Health formally solicited proposals for a "988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline Call Center Serving the U.S. Virgin Islands." The procurement was issued through the Department of Property and Procurement on behalf of DOH's Division of Behavioral Health, with proposals due Jan. 13.

[Procurement materials](#) described the goal as establishing and operating a fully functional, certified crisis center dedicated to the Virgin Islands. The proposed center was expected to provide 24-hour, seven-day-a-week telephone crisis support, with infrastructure for future integration of text and chat services. Crisis counselors would be responsible for assessing callers, de-escalating emergencies and connecting people with appropriate care, including mobile crisis teams or inpatient treatment when necessary.

The procurement also required the operator to meet national 988 standards and obtain or pursue certification through Vibrant Emotional Health, the nonprofit administrator of the national Lifeline network.

Call Historically Routed Outside Territory

The purpose of creating a local center was not simply to add another telephone operation.

National 988 infrastructure is designed around geographic crisis centers. When a jurisdiction has an eligible local center, callers can be connected to counselors familiar with the area's treatment providers, emergency systems and community resources. If no local center is available, calls can be routed elsewhere in the national backup network.

The Virgin Islands procurement specifically identified off-island routing as a problem the new center was intended to address, describing the project as a way to provide crisis support tailored to the territory and its population.

Local handling could make a meaningful difference during a behavioral-health emergency. A counselor physically or operationally connected to the Virgin Islands system would be better positioned to understand which clinics are operating on St. Croix or St. Thomas, what transportation or emergency resources are available, and when a situation should be escalated to territorial responders.

It would also allow the territory to build a more complete crisis-response system around the initial 988 contact rather than treating the telephone call as a standalone service.

VITEMA's Role Points to Emergency-Response Integration

The scheduled participation of VITEMA Director Daryl Jaschen in Tuesday's announcement is another indication that the development extends beyond a conventional mental-health hotline.

VITEMA operates the territory's emergency communications infrastructure, including 911 services. Its participation suggests that DOH is working to better coordinate what happens when a 988 contact involves an immediate threat to life or requires intervention by emergency responders.

That distinction is central to the national 988 model.

Most calls are intended to be resolved through conversation, counseling, safety planning and connection to community services rather than through police or emergency medical intervention. But where a person faces an imminent threat, crisis centers must be capable of coordinating an appropriate emergency response.

The Department of Health said its Tuesday announcement will address not only 988 services but the continued development of a coordinated behavioral-health crisis response system in the territory.

DOH has already said it is seeking to expand community-based behavioral-health services and crisis-response capacity. In January, the department described its existing system as a combination of outpatient care, community services, crisis intervention when activated by other government agencies, and off-island inpatient placement for patients requiring certain levels of treatment.

The department also operates behavioral-health outreach vehicles known as "Zen Vans," another potential component of a system in which a local crisis center could connect callers to resources beyond the telephone.

Federal Government Has Put Nearly \$1.3 Million Into USVI 988 Development

The territorial buildout has been supported by substantial federal funding.

Federal grant records show that the V.I. Department of Health received a SAMHSA Virgin Islands 988 Cooperative Agreement beginning in September 2023 specifically to improve how the territory responds to 988 calls, chats and texts.

The award has generated approximately \$1.29 million in federal funding actions through the current grant period, which runs through Sept. 29, 2026. The original 2023 award was \$634,202, followed by another \$634,202 in 2024 and a \$25,000 expansion award in 2025.

The federal grant description specifically says the Virgin Islands program is intended to improve the territory's response to contacts coming through 988.

The timing is notable. The federal cooperative agreement expires later this month, while DOH is preparing to announce its major 988 milestone on Sept. 8.

Tuesday's Date is Deliberate

The announcement is scheduled for 988 Day, observed nationally each year on Sept. 8 — 9/8.

SAMHSA describes the observance as a national initiative aimed at increasing awareness of the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline and emphasizing mental-health and suicide prevention. The 2026 theme is "988 Reasons: Your reason is reason enough," emphasizing that people do not have to be suicidal or at an immediate breaking point before contacting the service.

People may contact 988 for depression, anxiety, substance-use concerns, loneliness, emotional distress or concern about another person. Calls, texts and chats are available 24 hours a day.

The Department of Health has placed increasing emphasis on public awareness of the service this year. Its Gen Z suicide-prevention campaign, launched in May for residents ages 14 through 26, prominently encourages young people and their families to use 988 when they need emotional support.

Tuesday Should Answer the Remaining Questions

If the local call center is formally activated as expected, Tuesday's announcement should clarify several important details that are not yet public, including who has been selected to operate the center, where counselors will be based, whether calls will immediately be answered locally 24/7, how text and chat will be routed, and how the center will coordinate with VITEMA, emergency medical services, police and behavioral-health response teams.

It should also establish what happens when all local counselors are occupied, how calls originating from V.I. telephone numbers but made while residents are off-island will be handled, and how the system will use the newer national georouting capability that directs many wireless 988 calls according to a caller's approximate physical location rather than solely by telephone area code. The national Lifeline began rolling out that capability in 2024.

What is already clear from the public record is that the Virgin Islands has been working for several years toward precisely this milestone: moving from merely having access to the national 988 number to operating a crisis-response system capable of answering Virgin Islanders locally and connecting them directly with resources in their own community.

The Department of Health's press conference is scheduled for 10 a.m. Tuesday at the Viya Building in Estate Diamond, St. Croix.

