

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Sen. Diane Capehart Suffering From Chikungunya

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Sen. Diane Capehart has been stricken by the mosquito-borne illness chikungunya, the *VI Consortium* has confirmed with officials at the senator's office.

Employees say the St. Croix senator had been unable to attend any Senate hearings this week due to the illness. It is unclear if Sen. Capehart is being treated on-island or if she is being treated elsewhere.

The viral disease has symptoms similar to dengue that generally begin three to seven days after being bitten by an infected mosquito. Symptoms may include fever, severe joint pain (often in the hands and feet), headache, muscle pain, joint swelling or rash. Chikungunya is rarely fatal.

In August, the Virgin Islands Health Department reported there were over 150 suspected cases of chikungunya in the territory. In early September, that number had almost tripled as the department reported 415 suspected cases. Of that number, 389 suspected cases were reported on St. Thomas and St. John, while only 22 suspected cases were reported on St. Croix.

The amount of chikungunya cases now being reported in the territory is so widespread it has become difficult for the Virgin Islands Department of Health (DOH) to keep count.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has been assisting the DOH in strengthening its efforts to better investigate and diagnose potential cases, conduct proper surveillance and help educate health care workers about the clinical management of the virus. Because research confirmed that the *Aedes aegypti* mosquitoes carrying the chikungunya disease are usually found in homes and enclosed places, and lay their eggs in homes and other dwellings, the strategy used to help minimize the spread of the disease in the VI has been a combination of public outreach, source reduction and education on personal protection. The same strategy was reiterated in a media campaign waged by the DOH; however, the community's frustration, especially in St. Thomas where almost all cases have been reported, is now palpable.

Health Commissioner Darice Plaskett said the CDC's arboviral experts and vector control specialists, "the most effective method of abatement for *Aedes aegypti* mosquito in the territory is source reduction/elimination (draining and dumping stagnant water from containers like buckets, pet dishes, flower pots and tires)," and eradicating mosquito larva from large bodies of stagnant water that cannot be drained or dumped, by using the bacterial insecticide known as Bti briquettes or mosquito dunks.

The Department of Health's territorial epidemiologist, Dr. Esther Ellis, has said that the territory was now experiencing a chikungunya epidemic, and gave residents as well as visitors, pertinent advice to protect themselves from catching the disease.

They include:

- Use insect repellents — Repellents containing DEET or oil of lemon eucalyptus. Apply repellent only to exposed skin or clothing, follow product instructions carefully. Do not use repellents on babies less than two months of age.
- Use air conditioning or window/door screens to keep mosquitoes outside. If you are not able to protect yourself from mosquitoes inside your home or hotel, sleep under a mosquito bed net.
- Wear clothing that protects you from mosquito bites (long-sleeved shirts and long pants).
- Protect infants: cover cribs, strollers and baby carriers with cotton mosquito netting at all times, day and night, both inside and outside of your home. Dress babies in loose cotton clothing that covers arms and leg.
- Treat clothing with permethrin or purchase permethrin-treated clothing.

Commissioner Plaskett reassured the community of the DOH's dedication to fighting the spread of chikungunya, and said the Department will increase the number of volunteers and staff traversing neighborhoods to raise awareness. Schools will also be canvased.

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