

The Virgin Islands Consortium

St. Croix's 7th Annual Project Homeless Connect A Success

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The Rudolph Shulterbrandt Agriculture Complex on St. Croix was a sea of activity on Friday as the 7th Annual Project Homeless Connect event brought together service providers and those in need of their services for a day of information and inspiration.

According to Commissioner of Human Services Christopher Finch, the one-day service fair is "designed to connect homeless people and people who are afraid that they're soon going to be homeless or could be homeless with services that are designed to help them."

Finch said service providers were sourced from government departments, non-profit agencies and, in some cases, private businesses.

At the six-hour event, attendees were served breakfast and lunch, as well as given haircuts, new shoes, new undergarments and gently used clothing. In addition, attendees had access to a host of health services, from flu shots to HIV testing.

"There's just a wealth of health services, health screenings that people can get--flu shots, tests for HIV, blood pressure, cholesterol, basic health screening tests," Finch explained.

In addition, Finch said there were a number of social service agencies and financial aid agencies present.

"Pretty much all the departments of human services that can have anything to do to help people of homelessness or financial aid, SNAP and Medicaid are here," he said, noting that vocation rehabilitation and even the headstart program were on hand.

In order to make the most of the day, volunteers, or escorts, were paired with those requiring services.

"The escort first interviews to find out what the person wants to get accomplished, and then the escort takes them around to all the areas just to make sure somebody doesn't get lost," Finch explained.

And he said this year's event brought out record numbers of those requiring the services offered, noting that number to be approximately 170 persons.

"I believe our previous record for St. Croix was around 120," he said, describing the spike in numbers as a "good news-bad news" phenomenon.

"The bad news is that many people feel they need the services," he said. "You know, the best news is if we did this and no body came. And the good news is that we are able to do this [for those that need it]."

Jason Henry, of the University of South Florida AIDS Education Training Center, was on hand to oversee the health services being provided at the event. He noted that service providers came from Barry University, UVI and Complex nursing students, as well as the Department of Health, F'sted Health Care and VI Care.

Henry pointed out that this year his team is giving special attention to following up with attendees.

"One of the things we've been focusing on this year with health services is to ensure that you get a screening today and there's follow-up tomorrow," he explained. "What have happened is that we've had people who have abnormal screenings, so at the end of the day, [me] being responsible for the health services, I'll be putting a group back together again to look at all the screenings that have been done, and we're going to reach out to the charities each of these homeless individuals are affiliated with, in order to get those people back to us to do the follow up and referral services."

For the first time, the Department of Health (DOH) put its new Mobile Medical Clinic to use. Astia LeBron, DOH director of public relations, explained.

"It has two exam rooms, it's fully outfitted to breast exams as well as other examinations for people of all ages," she said. "It's fully capable of meeting the needs of any community and just making sure that we do the general health services that we need and are lacking."

She added, "By having it mobile, we're increasing the access to care, so coming to this event is just tantamount to what we're trying to do and increase that access to care. We serve everyone because public health is not just about people who are gung-ho about just their health, but it's about spreading that know-how and getting other people gung-ho and motivating others to take care of themselves."

LeBron went on to say 20 or more breast screenings was conducted in the mobile clinic, which was financed through a federal grant.

Janelle Royer, vice president of the student government association of the University of the Virgin Islands, was also on hand to volunteer with eight other representatives of her organization.

"I think that SGA has a good presence on the UVI campus community and on my platform this year, I feel that we need to have more of a community presence," she said. "I think this is a good experience; the services they provide for those in need are tremendous."

Another part of Project Homeless Connect is its spiritual care component, which Finch described as "a very important piece and has always been a big part of the St. Croix event." Members of the Frederiksted Baptist Church, through its Eagles' Nest organization, was on hand to provide spiritual counseling and inspirational music.

Pastor John Gilbert shared why it was important for his congregation to be involved.

"To me, it's very, very important because you need to have a holistic approach when you're dealing with people--spirit, soul and body," he said. "Too often we focus on the physical side of the person, but not on the spiritual side."

He continued, "We have to understand the person is where they're at because there is a spiritual component in them that's missing. And the soul can be emotionally damaged, hurt and the soul needs to be healed. And so we are out here to provide them with that counseling, to pray with them, and to maybe give some direction in that area of their lives."

The event, which was largely put on through generous donations from businesses and organizations, was also funded through a \$40,000 foundation grant for all three islands. On October 17 and 24, Project Homeless Connect will service residents on St. Thomas and St. John, respectively.