

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Immigration & Customs Enforcement Launches Task Force In Territory To Combat Child Predators

VIC News / **Published On July 10, 2015 12:27 AM /**

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ST. THOMAS – Citing the need for a territory-wide approach to fighting the escalation of child exploitation and other predatory crimes against children, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) in St. Thomas and St. Croix has partnered with members of local, state and federal law enforcement, and community leaders, to form the U.S. Virgin Islands Crimes Against Children Task Force (VICTACTF), according to a press release the ICE issued on Thursday afternoon.

Through VICTACTF, federal and local law enforcement agencies will pool their resources to jointly investigate all crimes committed against children in the USVI. Task Force members will be encouraged to share evidence, ideas and investigative and forensic

tools to ensure the most successful prosecutions possible. As such, the VICACTF will allow law enforcement to speak with a unified voice to defend the children of the U.S. Virgin Islands.

The VICACTF is composed of the following agencies: ICE-HSI (lead agency), U.S. Attorney's Office, U.S. Marshals Service, the Virgin Islands Police Department, the Virgin Islands Department of Justice, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and the Virgin Islands Department of Human Services and Family Resource Center.

Each year, millions of children fall prey to sexual predators. These young victims are left with permanent psychological, physical and emotional scars. It is one of ICE's most important missions to investigate and target those who possess, transport and produce child pornography, as well as those who engage in child sex tourism, and those who use sex to entice minors.

Based on the number of complaints received by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) CyberTipline, Internet crimes against children are rising at alarming levels.

In July 2003, in an effort to put an end to this type of criminal activity and protect children worldwide, ICE developed an initiative known as "Operation Predator." Under Operation Predator, ICE and its law enforcement partners identify, investigate and arrest child predators and sexual offenders wherever they may attempt to hide. Since the inception of Operation Predator, the number of NCMEC referrals for new child exploitation cases in ICE HSI San Juan field office area of responsibility, which includes the USVI and Puerto Rico, has reached an all-time high resulting in more than 245 arrests. This year, the number of child exploitation-related arrests has increased by 39 percent with 50 arrests thus far compared to 36 in fiscal year 2014.

"ICE HSI is pleased to lead this initiative as it shows our commitment and that of our partners to protect our children from online predators," said Angel M. Melendez, special agent in charge of HSI Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. "Joint partnerships such as the VICACTF should send a clear message to those who exploit the most vulnerable segment of our society, our children, that we will not rest until they are brought to justice."

"It is absolutely essential that members of law enforcement, social service agencies and other stakeholders work together and leverage existing resources to prevent the exploitation of children," said U.S. Attorney Ronald W. Sharpe. "The U.S. Attorney's Office is proud to be a part of this initiative to protect our children."

"The Virgin Islands Department of Justice is committed to protecting the children within this community and will make every effort to prosecute identified child predators and sexual offenders. With an increase in this type of criminal activity, we must become more vigilant and use our resources more effectively to combat crimes against children and prosecute offenders to the fullest extent of the Law," said Virgin Islands Acting Attorney General James Carroll.

"The Virgin Islands Police Department embraces the collaborative efforts of the federal and local partnerships in addressing the issues relating to crimes committed against children," said Virgin Islands Police Commissioner Delroy Richards, Sr. "If the children

are indeed our future then we must protect them from all predatory elements that seek to undermine the very laws that are enacted to shield them from those elements. Our resources must be directed to a common goal that centers on the eradication of all suspected predators in the territory. The bottom line is 'zero' tolerance."

HSI encourages the public to report suspected child predators and any suspicious activity through its toll-free Tip Line at 1-866-DHS-2-ICE or by completing its online tip form. Both are staffed around the clock by investigators. Suspected child sexual exploitation or missing children may be reported to the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, an Operation Predator partner, via its toll free 24-hour hotline, 1-800-THE-LOST.

For additional information about wanted suspected child predators, download HSI's Operation Predator smartphone app or visit the online suspect alerts page. HSI is a founding member and current chair of the Virtual Global Taskforce, an international alliance of law enforcement agencies and private industry sector partners working together to prevent and deter online child sexual abuse.