

As USVI Plans Reopening to Leisure Travelers, Congresswoman Plaskett Casts Doubt on Accuracy of Coronavirus Numbers

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The host of a Philadelphia radio talk show described the Virgin Islands' COVID-19 response as “a promising tale of what’s done right” to keep infection rates and deaths low, but the show’s guest on Wednesday, Congresswoman Stacey Plaskett offered a markedly different view.

“While our numbers are low, like other places in the United States, we may in fact have higher numbers as the amount of testing may mask that,” the Congresswoman said. “Testing hasn’t been done in such a prevalent and pervasive manner as it should in the United States.”

Ms. Plaskett went on to question whether the territory’s hospitals — Juan F. Luis Hospital on St. Croix and the Schneider Regional Medical Center on St. Thomas — are prepared for a substantial

increase in hospitalizations related to the potentially deadly new coronavirus.

“After the hurricanes, we lost our hospitals. We are not operating at full capacity in those hospitals,” she said. “The notion of having a spike (in COVID-19 cases) at any point is really terrifying to us because we don’t have the beds (or) the healthcare workers to handle that if it were to happen.”

As of Thursday, the V.I. Department of Health reported that 1,409 tests have been administered with 69 positive results and 1,314 negatives. Twenty-six tests results are pending. There are two active cases being monitored by the health department. Six people have died as a result of COVID-19 infection, three of whom were from the same St. Croix family.

As the territory prepares for the return of leisure travelers in the weeks ahead, Ms. Plaskett’s warnings were dramatic, if not ill-timed. Governor Albert Bryan, who had not heard the Congresswoman’s comments, defended the work of the Department of Health .

“We have expanded testing in the territory. We have actually at this point tested 1.4 percent of our population and continue to allow anyone who feels the need to be tested to be tested,” Mr. Bryan said.

Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion said earlier this week that the VIDOH expects to have the capacity to perform up to 1,000 coronavirus tests per day, once the U.S. Food and Drug Administration gives the OK to use new testing equipment. The added testing capacity does not mean the territory should expect to see “mass testing,” which she said is most valuable when there is “wide community spread” of the virus.

Mr. Bryan said he is aware of the push by the Trump administration to test two percent of the U.S. population monthly. “If you think about that, we haven’t even tested two percent in 60 days. That’s a very aggressive approach, but certainly not unattainable for the Virgin Islands.”

Dr. Esther Ellis, the Territorial Epidemiologist, told lawmakers earlier this month that the public health experts had planned all along for a spike of COVID-19 cases. The hospitals, she said, have prepared with additional supplies, beds, ventilators, and other equipment.

Ms. Plaskett’s comments underscores the view that testing many more people — locally and nationally — is the key to containing the spread of the disease. That view that widespread testing is the right thing to do is shared by politicians and some public health experts alike. Most people infected with the disease may show mild or no symptoms, but asymptomatic carriers can infect others who with worse outcomes.

The VIDOH has taken the more conservative approach to COVID-19 testing. The department tests those who have symptoms of the disease or have a strong likelihood of infection because of travel or close contact with an infected person.