

The Virgin Islands Consortium

At Project Homeless Connect, An Abundance Of Care For One Day

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ST. CROIX -- The Rudolph Schulerbrandt Market Building at the east entrance of the Agricultural Fair Grounds in Estate Lower Love, looked like a busy market. There was food being served on the outside in a separate area. Inside the building, a host of medical personnel offered a dizzying array of services to a myriad of men and women free of charge. There was free clothes as well, enough to fit all sizes.

On the east stage, local gospel singers [sang songs of praise](#) and worship to an ever-moving people. Some paused and looked. Others, seated underneath tents, gave the occasional nod. There was [one man](#) standing with the singers, but most steered clear of the scorching sun.

Senator Kurt Vialet, with staff in tow, gave away toiletries gathered by himself and Senators Neville James and Novelle Francis at their many hotel stops when in St. Thomas. Elsewhere, veteran Senator Terrence "Positive" Nelson, whose hosting [a peace concert at the same location on Sunday](#), gave free haircuts. "Stick around and you will learn many things about me," Mr. Nelson told The Consortium while cutting, his gleeful demeanor ever present.

Even portraits were being taken by [Youth With A Mission](#), with Kendall Jones and Cherilyn Derusha, along with other YWAM staff, treating anyone who wished to remember the moment like superstars. Portraits were available soon after being shot.

Human Services was also on hand, with former Senator Diane Capehart, now administrator for the medicaid program at HS, giving applications and making known documents required to receive financial aid, and other forms of government and federal assistance.

Medical relief being freely given was made possible courtesy Frederiksted Health Care, University of the Virgin Islands nurses and Juan E. Luis Hospital nurses. Services included blood pressure, cholesterol,



Volunteers providing an

array of services to St. Croix's homeless residents inside the Rudolph Schulerbrandt Market Building.

It was the place for the homeless on this island to be. Free everything. Some even temporarily forgot their dismal circumstances and smiled a bit -- at least for a moment -- fully aware that their good times would soon come to an end; as Project Homeless Connect -- an annual event organized by the United Way, Human Services, local businesses and nonprofit organizations, that sees the community coming together to offer food, clothing, medical and other services to homeless residents -- lasts but for one day.

Mr. Vialet said Friday was encouraging and disheartening all at once.

"We need to do this more than once a year," he said "If we're able to do it every quarter, it would also provide the support services that the homeless need to help get them back into normalcy." The senator then showed a portrait that he and one of his staff members took with a homeless man. Mr. Violet said the gentlemen, originally from another island in the West Indies, was determined to succeed during his school days. But because he had no support system here, he constantly had difficulty securing a place to stay.

The event "is great, but it's also sad because of the volume of people that are here to receive services," Mr. Violet went on. "And that's why I think that it's so important that we try to reach out to this community as much as we can."

The first-term Democrat said Vinod Dadlani, chief executive officer of United Way of St. Thomas-St. John, told him that one of the difficulties in putting the annual event together is finding volunteers. And Mr. Jones, a longtime volunteer, told The Consortium that the turnout has been greater in past years.

"We need to become an island that is more giving," Mr. Violet said. "Everybody is always looking. The more giving we are, the more we're going to begin to see change on this island, and that's the philosophy of my office."

The medical services provided free of charge to the homeless on Friday is always available, according to Jason Henry, Cpl. at St. Croix Rescue. The challenge, Mr. Henry said, is getting the homeless to access the care more often, as they tend not to go for treatment because of the negatives they perceive to be associated with homelessness.

"But it does end here. After they've gotten their screenings today, we're following up. So if someone had a blood pressure or sugar that's out of wack, we're following up to get them back in good care," Mr. Henry said. The way this is done, he added, is by visiting the soup kitchens, whose employees are well acquainted with the homeless residents, and gathering information on how to locate them.

Yet those efforts, while noble, remain partial attempts to band-aid a growing problem in the Virgin Islands. One that was amplified when the economy took a downward turn in wake of the HOVENSA closure in 2012, which had a ripple effect in many other local industries.

Feature Image: A UVI nurse administering care to a homeless man.

Image Credit: VIC.