

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Survey Reveals Dismal Health Care In Territory, Calls For Overhaul

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ST. THOMAS -- Representatives from a cross section of government, non-profit, and healthcare agencies filled the small conference room at the St. Thomas East End Medical Center Corporation (STEEMCC) on Wednesday to receive the long-awaited results from a comprehensive healthcare needs assessment that began in April 2015, a press release issued yesterday by STEEMCC revealed.

Researchers from the University of the Virgin Islands Caribbean Exploratory Research Center (CERC) of Excellence reported the findings from surveying a broad spectrum of health related issues of approximately 600 adults and students on the east end of St. Thomas. The outcomes reflected a community in need of health literacy and radical

change in the delivery of healthcare.

The Tutu and Bovoni housing communities were reported to occupy up to 95 percent low, very low, or extremely low income families. Overweight and obesity prevailed among 70 percent of adults, and 62 percent of children consumed a diet that primarily included fried or processed food. Noreen Michael, PhD of CERC discussed aspects of the study that also reflected behavioral and dental health, reporting over 50 percent of adults are missing permanent teeth and 52 percent of children moreover feel sad or hopeless almost daily.

Another part of the survey included self-assessment where the data reflected 70 percent of adults believing their health to be good, very good or excellent; and 76 percent to have had a routine check-up in the last year. Access to medical care via insurance including Medicare was not an issue for 74 percent of those surveyed; but 48 percent have not purchased prescriptions in the last year because of cost. Laverne Ragster, PhD, President Emerita of the University of the Virgin Islands, and contributor to CERC stressed the importance of ensuring education and economic availability be considered in the avenues taken to offer nutrition education to the most vulnerable populations.

Moletto A. Smith Jr., Executive Director of STEEMCC, applauded the efforts of the CERC team to compile the data and stated the information is the end result of the 1st part of the process to improve the delivery of healthcare.

“We [healthcare] are currently conducting ‘end-stage’ disease management. We need to refine and reform the delivery of healthcare by moving toward preventive care. We live on an island, but we are not one unto ourselves,” he said.

Mr. Smith detailed the next steps the health center would take to provide medical services, including determining how to help patients pay for care. He said the health center has a series of initiatives slated for 2016, and reiterated the intended expansion of dental services by March 2016 with five new chairs and a newly hired hygienist and dentist.

A collaboration with the Department of Health and other nonprofits will collectively provide behavioral health services at the medical center by early 2016, and vouchers will be issued in order of priority to patients for transportation to the health center via VITRAN bus services. Extended hours during the week and weekends will also be implemented in the coming year. Mr. Smith strongly stated the need for collaboration with government and private entities to ensure successful effort in radically changing healthcare in the Virgin Islands.

For approximately two years, STEEMCC has taken needed steps to implement a comprehensive community healthcare needs assessment to support the need for a pilot outreach program to serve the medically underserved and uninsured school-aged populations, including those who have limited or no access to primary preventative healthcare, according to the release. In 2014, the health center was awarded a \$200,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Interior to complete the research. The University of the Virgin Islands Caribbean Exploratory Research Center Health, and its Eastern Caribbean Center was selected to conduct the study. Through these programs, the university is the sole provider of scientific data driven research and analysis in the US Virgin Islands for

demographic, social and health issues and is the designated State Administrator of the US Census for the US Virgin Islands.

The final report will be delivered to the US Department of Interior, VI Governor's office, the Department of Health, Frederiksted Health Care, Inc., federal partners and stakeholders.

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