

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Critical Condition: Dept. Of Health At Risk Of Not Being Able To Respond To 911 Emergency Calls

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ST. THOMAS -- The Virgin Islands Department of Health is in need of more funding than what has been allocated in the past to perform critical functions that Health Commissioner Dr. Michelle Davis says are pressing and need to be addressed straightaway. Above, ambulances stationed at the Juan F. Luis Hospital.

Dr. Davis listed six "urgent" needs as part of D.O.H.'s nearly \$52.8 million fiscal year 2017 budget hearing; the first and most crucial being the need to purchase new ambulances for D.O.H.'s emergency medical services.

"The Department of Health is currently at risk of not being able to respond to 911 emergency calls for Virgin Islanders in need of urgent care. We are down to 1-2 functioning ambulances on each island on any given day. Fifteen of the vehicles in our ambulance fleet are 5- 17 years old. Purchasing new ambulances takes 6 months or longer," Dr. Davis said.

Number two on the most urgent list was funding to support the costs for behavioral health patients who are currently placed off-island, as well as for future off-island placements. Dr. Davis revealed that 20 patients have been placed at off-island facilities; costing the government near \$4 million annually. She said because of the lack of funding, D.O.H. "is currently at risk for patients being discharged and transferred from off-island facilities back to the territory where there is no capacity to house them."

The off-island placements came through a court order because of the severity of the patients.

In March, 2015, police said a homeless and mentally ill man [killed](#) -- with a machete -- an 80-year-old man who was visiting the grave of his deceased wife. The incident [caused an uproar](#) in the community, and [politicians had promised action](#).

Some senators saw the \$3.8 million annual total as excessive, but Senator Kurt Vialet explained that housing mentally ill patients is not a cheap task. And Dr. Davis said while the territory has one facility that houses the mentally ill in St. Thomas -- the Eldra Schulterbrant facility -- St. Croix needs a facility of its own. The territory houses five critically ill patients at [Larkin Community Hospital](#) in South Florida for \$2.6 million annually.

Other urgent needs include consolidation of employees on this island, renovations and repairs to the Charles Harwood Memorial Hospital in St. Croix, and assistance with paying D.O.H.'s utility bills.

"The utility expenses for the department of health physical plants have increased well above the approved budgeted allotments," Dr. Davis said. D.O.H. is also looking to fill 30 vacant positions.

Dr. Davis highlighted some of the department's successes, including nationwide praise for its Zika education program and the launch of the long-anticipated [Cancer Registry](#). The department has transitioned and implemented the new national training standards for EMS Certification as set forth by the Department of Transportations' National Highway, Traffic and Safety Administration; it has conducted professional development training for employees during the last three months; and the department successfully submitted a National Health Services Corp Application -- which D.O.H. says had not been done for several years -- allowing the department to recruit needed clinicians to the territory to provide a variety of health services.