

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Mapp Working With Creators Of Biggest Loser TV Show To Bring Weight Loss Program To USVI

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ST. THOMAS -- During a press conference held at Government House here on Tuesday, Governor Kenneth Mapp announced a major wellness initiative aimed at fostering healthy living for Virgin Islanders, especially those employed with the Government of the Virgin Islands, whose insurance policy is under immense stress, the governor said, because of the amount of individuals who have one or more illnesses.

Mr. Mapp, who recently returned from taking part in a stateside wellness program with the creators of The Biggest Loser, said at the press conference that he's working with the departments of Health and Sports, Parks and Recreation to bring new programs to the territory emphasizing healthier lifestyles.

"Improving the health of Virgin Islanders will enhance our quality of life, reduce the burden on our health care facilities and lower the cost of insurance premiums," the territory's leader said. He said that the territory now spends more than \$165 million on insurance premiums representing nearly a quarter of the entire territorial budget. More than 26,000 Virgin Islanders are covered by the government's health insurance plans, according to the governor. Of that amount, over 7,000 suffer with a catastrophic or chronic disease; 30 percent of the plan's participants are struggling with hypertension; and 22 percent with diabetes. Some members of the plan, the governor revealed, suffer with 3-4 illnesses, to include cardiac, sight and cancer issues.

"On this trajectory we will run out of money," Mr. Mapp said. The governor also made known that at the current rate, the price tag for government health insurance could rise to \$200 million in the next two years.

"Two hundred million dollars would be 28 percent of the general fund revenues of the Virgin Islands, and my friends, it would simply be a plan that we could not afford to pay," he said. If the costs were to increase to that amount, Mr. Mapp said actions would be taken to reduce benefits, "and what level, if any, of increases could be absorbed to ensure that our employees, their dependents and our retirees are covered."

The chief executive discussed his participation in a wellness and weight loss program run by the creators of the Biggest Loser television show. The programs operate out of various Marriott resort properties across the United States and offer healthy meals and classes covering both fitness and nutrition.

Mr. Mapp, who participated with representatives from D.O.H., Sports, Parks and Recreation, as well as the Department of Tourism and the GVI Insurance Board, had high praise for the Biggest Loser program.

He said that other insurance plans cover employee enrollment at programs such as those offered by the Biggest Loser, and that the Insurance Board was working to negotiate reimbursement for its members going forward. In the meantime, he said, the government and the Insurance Board would be working with the company to help develop a Virgin Islands wellness strategy and that the territory's doctors and fitness experts would be invited to participate in upcoming discussions.

Part of the strategy, Mr. Mapp revealed, would include the building of wellness centers in both island districts where residents would be able to exercise. The government would employ local trainers to lead the effort, but he stressed that trainers would need to be learned professionals with documentation proving their expertise.

Asked by The Consortium if he had lost weight at the Biggest Loser program in California, where he trained for about a week, the governor swiftly affirmed that he had dropped a few pounds. "I lost weight and I lost inches," he said.

D.O.H. Commissioner Dr. Michelle Davis was among those that took part in the program, lauding its comprehensive approach.

"We learned about a mind, body and soul conversion," she said.

The governor said there is also an effort to bring a Biggest Loser program to a Virgin Islands resort in order to bolster the territory's tourism product. He said the government "did not pay any fee" for his actual participation in the Biggest Loser program, but rather covered only his travel expenses.

And Mr. Mapp, who has been open about his own health and weight loss challenges, said he would continue to remain very involved in promoting wellness for all Virgin Islanders.

"I am holding myself up as a poster child," he said. "We are going to do this as a community effort and I am working to put the necessary resources on the table."

Feature Image: Dolvett Quince trained Rachel Frederickson, 24, on Season 15 of "The Biggest Loser." She lost more than half of her body weight to win the competition. (Credit: Trae Patton)