

The Virgin Islands Consortium

With His Feb. 19 Mental Health State Of Emergency Declaration, Bryan Seeks To Improve Behavioral Services In U.S.V.I.

Health / **Published On March 10, 2019 11:40 AM /**

Staff **March 10, 2019**



Governor Albert Bryan on February 19 signed an executive order declaring a state of emergency on mental health in the U.S. Virgin Islands. In a release issued by Government House on Saturday, Mr. Bryan said the aim of the declaration is to improve behavioral services along with mental health in the territory. (The Government House release did not say when the order was signed. However, in a release issued on February 19, Senator Alicia Barnes commended Mr. Bryan for the declaration, which she said was signed on the aforementioned date.)

The executive order will enable the hiring of professionals in the mental health sector by the Department of Health (D.O.H.) along with the territory's hospitals, according to Government House. It also clears the path for D.O.H. to ramp up its search effort for behavioral health professionals.

The order will remain in effect until D.O.H. confirms that there are enough providers of psychiatric care in the territory, or for 180 days unless renewed by the governor, Government House said.

"We know well the lingering issues with mental and behavioral health in the territory. Since hurricanes Irma and Maria the need for these services has grown, and with the departure of the emergency providers, the issue has become more critical. We can no longer ignore the need which will likely increase as we approach another hurricane season. The previous administration made a similar declaration in 2016. This time we need to follow through for the residents who need these services most," Mr. Bryan said, according to Government House.

He added, "Declaring this emergency will give our Department of Health access to federal resources and allow the department to expand its search for mental health providers. I thank the providers who have worked tirelessly to fill this void, but we have to provide the help they need. I am calling on the Agencies where these services will be provided to work together creatively to provide this important service to our community."

When the executive order was signed in February, Ms. Barnes commended the action. "I commend the governor on his recent action which extended the Mental Health State of Emergency," she said in a release issued February 20.

She added, "This action will facilitate the expedited hiring of mental health professionals by streamlining the personnel process bringing much needed relief to our residents who are suffering from behavioral health issues. I look forward to working with Governor Bryan and my colleagues in the 33rd Legislature for the implementation of short and long term solutions to remedy the longstanding mental health crisis plaguing our community."

The executive order makes way for the swift deployment of providers from the United States Public Health Services Commissioned Corps and other federal programs. It also suspends provisions in the Virgin Islands Code that restrict the rehiring of retired mental health professionals, Government House said.

Government House said Department of Health Commissioner Nominee Justa Encarnacion, along with Deputy Commissioner Nicole Craigwell Syms, have made strengthening mental health care and expanding the services a priority and are both leading the administration's efforts to improve the delivery of mental health and behavioral services throughout the territory.

"The Department of Health is grateful to Governor Albert Bryan, Jr. and Lieutenant Governor Tregenza Roach for their support regarding behavioral and mental health services in the form of Executive Order 486-2019. I am confident that the order will expedite the hiring of necessary providers in the territory," Ms. Encarnacion said. "The executive order provides an avenue to increasing access to services that have been decreased in some areas and non-existent in others. The department's goal is to promote 'mental wellness' which we can accomplish through rapid outpatient responses

to acute psychotic episodes, and we are looking forward to the opportunities that lie ahead."

© Viconsortium 2026