

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Dept. Of Health Embarks On Food Inspection Initiative With Aim Of Protecting Residents, Educating Restaurateurs

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Leaders at the Department of Health, among them Commissioner Nominee Justa Encarnacion, Division of Environmental Health Director Juanita Johannes, and Health Inspector Sinclair Felix, spoke with The Virgin Islands Consortium Sunday afternoon relative to an initiative the department has embarked on, whose aim is to ensure that food businesses in the territory are in compliance with the Virgin Islands Food Code.

The interview was sparked by information the The Consortium had obtained suggesting that some restaurants on St. Croix were oddly closed on a day they are normally open for

business. The publication made contact with Ms. Encarnacion, who gathered her team and spoke openly about the initiative, and stressed that D.O.H. had not closed any restaurants, but instead had partnered with those entities in helping them meet the standard required by law. Ms. Encarnacion's and her team's openness during the interview was refreshing, and the team explained succinctly how the department was going about the initiative.

"This is a wonderful opportunity to enlighten the public and inform them of what we're doing. We're taking this as a good teaching opportunity for everyone who runs a restaurant and who sits in restaurants," Ms. Encarnacion said.

If a restaurant appeared closed on any given day last week, it's a decision the owner did voluntarily, Mr. Felix said. He explained the inspection process as entailing a visit to the business, a check to ensure compliance, and if this business is found wanting, an educational process commences, and instead of fines, this business is encouraged to use the money that it could have been fined to rectify the deficiencies.

"At this moment we are educating, and we would like the business owner to take in the education, make your corrections and you should be good for any inspection," Mr. Felix said.

Ms. Johannes said the Virgin Islands Food Code was adopted in 2004, but the law was never actually enforced -- something D.O.H. hopes to change, as it seeks to protect Virgin Islanders from food-borne illnesses. In the process, however, the department is particularly careful not to hurt the reputation of local food businesses, and has therefore been going about the inspections clandestinely.

"The approach is tender on the person, tough on the issues," Ms. Johannes said. "If a walk-in cooler is to hold the temperature of 41 degrees, we shouldn't find it at 48; we shouldn't find it at 50 degrees [because] the food is compromised. However, "rather than coming down on the individual, and recognizing there's a need to educate, we're educating all owners, operators, employees of food service establishments.

"How do we educate them? We go out, we identify the imminent health risk and rather than fighting them or taking money from the establishment, they're encouraged to use that money to bring about full compliance of their existing establishment. And we don't just tell them to make the corrections, they have our numbers, they have the ability for us to come back and guide them through corrective measures," Ms. Johannes said.

She stressed that no restaurant was closed by D.O.H. "What we do is we go out, identify the infractions, and the establishment would take it upon themselves to go ahead and make those necessary corrections. In terms of saying close, no. But if they have food that would pose a risk to the community, then they're advised that that food isn't good any longer. Adulterated food can't be used in the establishment."

"We can fine you, but we don't want to fine you because that's money. So take the money that you would normally pay for a fine to fix what you should be fixing. So they're not being fined right now," Ms. Encarnacion stressed.

Some businesses have voluntarily closed their operations temporarily after infractions were discovered by the D.O.H. inspectors, the health officials said.

"We have adopted the mantra educate before we regulate. We're sensitive to the the businesses' reputation," a D.O.H. deputy commissioner said.

The officials said they were careful not to publicize their work, knowing the food business is one that relies on reputation, and one bad report could negatively impact operations.

Restaurants in the Virgin Islands are booming at the moment, especially on St. Croix, whose culinary business has been celebrated in top magazines. The influx of disaster recovery workers to the territory, along with over a 1,000 individuals from the mainland and Puerto Rico who are here working at Limetree Bay, has added to the boom.

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