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Kitchen Staff at Ulla F. Muller Take Covid-19-Related Job Action: 'Dept. of Education Forcing Us to Work in Contaminated Building'

Coronavirus / **Published On December 11, 2020 07:42 AM /**

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Kitchen employees of the Ulla F. Muller Elementary School refused to enter the building on Friday, Dec. 11 fearing for their health. The Dept. of Education closed the kitchens after being contacted by the Consortium for comment. By. PROVIDED

ST. THOMAS — Ulla F. Muller Elementary School kitchen staff have decided not to enter their work building today because of what they contend is the V.I. Department of Education's lack of regard for their lives and safety, after a kitchen employee tested positive for Covid-19 and the department directed that employees continue showing up for work without quarantining.

According to one of the kitchen staff, who spoke to the Consortium on the condition of anonymity, fearing retribution, a kitchen employee tested positive for Covid-19, and this employee was among other workers prior to testing positive for the virus. Also in contact with this employee were warehouse and delivery workers who deliver items to all the kitchens for staff to prepare.

"We're outside today because this is unfair. They're not even saying let us give them a week to quarantine. And it's not that we want to be home because it might be a week without getting paid," said the employee. "But we're concerned about our health. And they want us to be in here, the kitchens are not big, we don't have nowhere in this kitchen to social distance, we are not getting to stay home to quarantine even though everybody has been exposed to this virus, and we still have to come back here to be amongst each other."

The employee added, "I feel like the Dept. of Education is treating us unfairly and they don't care about our health. Right about now it's our health on the line. We are not worrying about a paycheck because we could drop down today or tomorrow and leave the paycheck right here. A lot of us are older people who have different ailments such as high blood pressure, diabetes and other illnesses. And not only that, when we leave from here, we are going home to our family as well."

An estimated 15 individuals work at the Ulla Muller facility, the kitchen employee said.

The V.I. Department of Health on Wednesday reported a total of 166 active Covid-19 cases, with St. Thomas accounting for 52 of the total infections. On Thursday, though the department did not provide complete data, [it revealed](#) another 34 cases were confirmed, including eight new infections in St. Thomas.

D.O.H. said it would provide a statement to the Consortium, which at time of writing had not been furnished. The Consortium also reached out to the Dept. of Education for comment, however instead of responding, the department issued a press release stating that meal distribution sites in St. Thomas would close today "due to a confirmed case of Covid-19 affecting operations." Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion said she spoke with Education officials this morning.

Kitchens in St. John will remain open, D.O.E. said.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention currently recommends a quarantine period of 14 days for persons exposed to Covid-19. However, based on local circumstances and resources, the following options to shorten quarantine are acceptable alternatives:

Quarantine can end after Day 10 without testing and if no symptoms have been reported during daily monitoring.

When diagnostic testing resources are sufficient and available, then quarantine can end after day 7 if a diagnostic specimen tests negative and if no symptoms were reported during daily monitoring.

