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Research Study Seeks to Learn How Vulnerable St. Thomas-St. John District Residents Are Recovering From 2017 Storms, Covid Pandemic

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Aerial view of damage in St. Thomas following Hurricane Irma. By. REEMY-REEMZ PHOTOGRAPHY

A research study is underway which is focused on examining how vulnerable St. Thomas-St. John residents are bouncing back from the collective impacts of the 2017 hurricanes and Covid-19 pandemic, according to a release issued last week. This study is being conducted through the combined efforts of the University of Florida, University of Maryland, and the Roy L Schneider Regional Hospital.

The release states that unprecedented events like back to back Category 5 hurricanes or a global pandemic, on their own are enough to cause a wide range of hardships for individuals and families. But two major hurricanes and a pandemic within a three year time-frame of each other even further increases the risk for economic, social, and health problems.

Nevertheless, despite all of the challenges, some people adjust and adapt better than others to cumulative stressors. This research study aims to identify the factors that enable this resilience and is geared toward informing future health care planning, interventions, and policy in the US Virgin Islands and in other regions of the US and the world, according to the release.

This research study is interview based, and due to the pandemic interviews are being conducted via telephone by local residents with extensive public health training and experience. The questions are about physical, mental, and quality of life outcomes and the factors that enhance or interfere with protective activities or recovery.

All data is confidential and the interview session takes about one hour, so participants are reimbursed \$25 for their time. Participants were randomly selected from patients who visited the ED within three months of the 2017 Hurricanes. The study team will be reaching out to 300 potential study participants over the next three months.

The study team, Dr. Glenn Morris (University of Florida), Dr. Lynn Grattan (University of Maryland) and Dr. Clayton Wheatley (Roy L. Schneider Regional Hospital, Emergency Department) have been working together for more than 10 years. Most recently, they published a paper in the American Journal of Public Health documenting the kinds of patients that have the greatest emergency care needs in the three months post hurricane compared to the same pre-hurricane time period. The most severely ill patients were transferred off island and post-hurricane patients were more likely to be older residents with chronic medical conditions such as diabetes and asthma. Younger adults and children also presented to the Emergency Room in large numbers with asthma and respiratory problems as well as injuries as a result of hurricane clean up.

This study team has done previous work in the US Virgin Islands, including a major study of Ciguatera Fish Poisoning where they documented incidence, prevalence, and symptoms as far back as 1981. At that time, Dr. Morris who was then with the CDC had the honor of working with Dr. Roy L. Schneider. Recent, follow-up studies by this research team have found that despite climate change, there has been no increase in episodes of fish poisoning over the past 25 years, largely due to effective community education programs on the island.

Funding for this research study was made available by the National Institute of Minority Health and Diseases Awarded to Dr. Glenn Morris (University of Florida) and Dr. Lynn Grattan from the University of Maryland is overseeing field data collection.