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43-Year-Old Among Latest Covid Deaths Reported by V.I. Dept. of Health, Bringing Territory's Total to 35

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The V.I. Dept. of Health has announced the 34th and 35th Covid-related deaths in the USVI, both identified as male victims.

"After further investigating cause of death and ensuring notification of next of kin, the Virgin Islands Department of Health is saddened to confirm the territory's thirty-fourth and thirty-fifth deaths related to COVID-19. Deceased on St. Thomas is an 84-year-old male and deceased on St. Croix is a 43-year-old male," D.O.H. announced.

The latest deaths come as health officials confirm the presence of the Delta variant in the U.S. Virgin Islands, and as active infections have surged in the past week. "With this surge in positive cases there is a greater chance for the virus to mutate. Identifying this variant in one district only

indicates to us that it has already covered the whole territory as inter-island travel heightens the spread," D.O.H. said Wednesday.

As of Thursday, there were 188 active Covid cases in the USVI: 62 on St. Croix, 119 on St. Thomas, and 7 on St. John.

As of Monday, there were sixteen Covid patients at the territory's hospitals, with the Schneider Regional Medical Center accounting for eleven, and the Juan F. Luis Hospital, five. At least two patients were ventilated at SRMC and one at JFL.

Scientists say the Delta Covid strain, also known as the B.1.617.2 variant, appears to have two advantages over earlier forms of the virus: it is more infectious and appears to be more effective at evading vaccines, though people who are fully vaccinated have significant protection against Covid. The strain is 40-80 percent more contagious than the Alpha (original).

Last month, about half of adults infected in an outbreak of the Delta variant in Israel were fully inoculated with the Pfizer Inc. vaccine. This reality prompted the Israeli government to reimpose an indoor mask requirement and other measures to contain the highly transmissible strain.

Governor Albert Bryan on Monday encouraged residents to take precautions and follow Covid guidelines. He also pushed hard for vaccination, and said if Covid-19 numbers remain elevated, restrictions would be reintroduced, among them a decrease in capacity for gatherings.

As of Monday, 48.1 percent of the USVI population is vaccinated against Covid, which equates to 38,220 residents. D.O.H. said 70 percent of the population needs to be vaccinated in order to achieve herd immunity.

Mr. Bryan also said the Covid-19 Task Force will be stricter in enforcing rules. He said the administration has worked with the public, including owners of establishments such as bars and restaurants to be more lenient when Covid numbers are trending lower. However, with the positive cases rising and the Delta variant afoot in the territory, leniency is being abandoned — at least for now — for more active enforcement, according to the governor.