

USVI Has Lowest Vaccination Rate in U.S., Highest Daily Positive Caseload, Health Commissioner Reports; 80 New Cases Recorded Thursday

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Ernice Gilbert **September 09, 2021**

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V.I. Dept. of Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion on Thursday said the U.S. Virgin Islands has the lowest Covid vaccination rate in the U.S. She also said Covid-19 cases were again on the rise in the territory, with 80 active infections recorded today, a majority of which were confirmed on St. Croix.

The commissioner revealed the numbers during a V.I. Dept. of Education press briefing at Gov't House on St. Croix, where Education Commissioner Racquel Berry-Benjamin encouraged parents to ascertain that their children are healthy before dropping them off to school. D.O.E. closed the Pearl B. Larsen and Ulla F. Muller schools on St. Croix and St. Thomas respectively, because of Covid-19 exposure. The schools, set to continue in-person learning Monday, had only started

receiving students for on-campus instruction Tuesday.

"The United States Virgin Islands is the lowest in vaccination rate in the U.S.," Ms. Encarnacion said, stating that the USVI's vaccination rate was still below 50 percent. "However, we are the highest in number of persons contracting Covid per day per capita," she added, revealing that 80 active cases were confirmed territory-wide Thursday. Of the 80 cases, St. Croix accounted for 50, St. Thomas 27, and St. John 3. "Our numbers on St. Croix are definitely going up," she said.

The territory-wide active caseload as of Thursday stood at 215: 147 on St. Croix, 68 on St. Thomas and 5 active cases on St. John.

"The best mitigation factor for Covid-19 is becoming vaccinated," Ms. Encarnacion stated.

The commissioner said the Mu variant of the virus has been in the territory for at least two months, a response she provided after the Consortium sought information on whether the strain of the virus was impacting the territory. She said the Delta variant remained the dominant version of Covid-19 locally.

D.O.E. Urging Parents to be Mindful

Ms. Berry-Benjamin said parents are partners in helping keep Covid away from school campuses. "We want to remind parents to remember to do the little things because they matter," she said. "Be very vigilant, check temperatures and of course if they have a Covid positive within the household, to not send that child or children to school. That's the best precautionary measure we could take in the household and then of course getting vaccinated is the ultimate precautionary measure at this time."

Ms. Encarnacion stressed the importance of vaccination, and said the continuance of in-person learning, which has proven to be much more effective than virtual classrooms, serves as a good reason to do so. "If I could look at parents and those care providers for children who actually attend school, I think this is one of the best reasons to take the vaccine," she said. "Not every student is a visual learner... auditory, yes, but we have to remember that the physical learning process is very critical to who we are and who we become."

She quoted the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as stating that if teachers, parents and eligible students become vaccinated, it would reduce the chances of Covid outbreaks on campuses. "That's one sure way of ensuring that in-school learning actually continues," Ms. Encarnacion said.