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Covid-19 Cases Climb to 365 in USVI; Schneider Hospital Restricts Visitation to Virtual Only; Omicron Most Likely the Cause of Surge

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Covid-19 cases in the U.S. Virgin Islands continue to grow at breakneck pace, jumping from 247 on Thursday to [365 on Friday](#). On Thursday, the V.I. Dept. of Health reported 101 new infections, resulting in a two-day total of 219 new positive cases.

St. Thomas accounts for 171 active cases, St. Croix 189, and St. John 5.

The surge is causing businesses and health facilities to rethink their strategies. The Schneider Regional Medical Center on Friday announced that it would restrict visits to virtual only, citing the rapid growth in cases.

"Based on the rapid increase in Covid-19 cases on St. Thomas, Schneider Regional Medical Center will immediately restrict visitation to virtual visits only to protect its vulnerable patients and its staff, who are working tirelessly to provide care," said the hospital via release. "The public is hereby advised that the previous visitation restrictions have been reinstated, and some previously approved in-person visitations are now suspended based on the current environment. There will be limited exceptions to these restrictions."

SRMC said it has enhanced its virtual visits program and will make every effort to connect its patients to their loved ones upon request.

"The leadership team of SRMC would like to assure the public that we are taking all preventative measures to ensure the safety and welfare of our patients and staff," stated the hospital. SRMC said the public will be notified once regular visitation resumes.

The surge in cases is most likely a result of the presence of the highly transmissible Omicron variant of Covid-19, according to Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion, who on Thursday evening called for residents to follow guidelines as they get together with family and friends for the holidays.

"Based on the high numbers that we're seeing, it is highly likely, it is a high probability that our numbers are high because we have Omicron in the territory," Ms. Encarnacion told the Consortium Thursday. "And everyone should act as though we do have Omicron and keep themselves safe, because it's proven to be a very contagious virus."

The good news is that the Omicron variant is proving to cause drastically less severe illness than other strains before it, including Delta. The variant's less severe nature has been backed up by three major studies so far, one from [South Africa where the strain was first detected in late November, another by Scotland](#), and a third [from the United Kingdom](#). The South African study, published online by researchers at South Africa's National Institute for Communicable Diseases, found people infected with Omicron were 70% to 80% less likely to need hospital treatment than people infected with earlier variants, including Delta, according to the Wall Street Journal.

In Scotland, 83.6% of people aged 12 and over have received two doses of vaccine, and 56.6% have received a third shot, WSJ said.

"One of the things that have been consistent is that [Omicron] is mild compared to Delta, so the number of hospitalizations and deaths are low, however the number of Covid-positive patients are higher," Ms. Encarnacion said.

She said the Department of Health has been working with Yale University on detecting the Omicron variant in the territory by sending samples to the institution, however she said the department would expand its efforts in the coming days to get faster results, as Yale has been inundated with requests.