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## Omicron Causing 90 Percent of Cases in USVI, Pushing Out Delta

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Linda Straker **December 31, 2021**

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Though it was already known that the Omicron variant of Covid-19 has been in wide circulation in the USVI, Governor Albert Bryan on Friday confirmed the variant's presence in the territory. The highly transmissible strain was first detected late November in South Africa, and it's responsible for the current rapid increase of active infections territory-wide.

“Yes, we have confirmed that this surge is being fueled by the highly transmissible Omicron variant,” Governor Bryan said in a news conference Friday. Warning that the increasing numbers would continue to go up before there is a reduction, he said that curbing the spread is the responsibility of all citizens.

Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion said that of the 80 test samples sent away for sequencing, 90 percent tested positive for the Omicron variant, while 10 percent tested positive Delta. The Omicron variant appears to be pushing the deadlier Delta variant out.

According to the V.I. Dept. of Health, there were 1,251 active infections territory-wide as of Thursday, with St. Croix accounted for 623 cases, followed by St. Thomas with 606, and St. John with 22. In St. Thomas, there were seven hospitalizations and no vented patients, while St. Croix had three hospitalizations with one patient on a ventilator. Ms. Encarnacion told the Consortium D.O.H. would provide the publication with detailed data on infection rates among the vaccinated and unvaccinated. She said most of the positive cases among vaccinated individuals were occurring in persons who had been vaccinated for 6 months or more, and not among individuals who had taken booster shots.

In an emotional plea, Governor Bryan called on all to avoid mass gathering events for the New Year's Eve night because the long-term benefit of making such a sacrifice would work in the best interest of all, he said.

“For those of you choosing to celebrate other than the safe confines of your homes, I urge you to please do so safely, but before I even go there, I just want to say that I will be in my house tonight and I urge you to be in your house,” he said.

“The safest place that you can be tonight is in your home...It's just not worth it for this one day of the year. But if you must, please do so in a safe manner and in full consideration of all the appropriate Covid-19 measures,” the governor said.

Pointing out that having more than 1,000 active infections was yet another record for the territory since the start of the pandemic in March 2020, Mr. Bryan said current statistics show that there is a 17.73 percent positivity rate among those who are tested.

“We have had surges before, and I think the highest we ever were was about 500, 400 [cases]. Today we are at 1,251 – that is three times more than we've ever been and our seven-day positivity rate is more than 17 percent,” he disclosed.

Advising that people should not enter a venue if they feel personally unsafe, he said, “If you go into someplace and it does not seem safe, just leave. You don't have to stay there, you don't have to go in there.”

Besides the fetes and partying, the governor also called on the religious community to think differently when it comes to battling Covid-19. “For our churches, our clergy, and everybody else, I know it's traditional for many of us to spend the old year/new year in church, but we are encouraging people to use the alternatives.

“For those churches still planning to offer in-person service this evening, I ask that you take appropriate measures to protect your congregants. Please insist on social distancing and mask-wearing and do not exceed the guidance on safe capacity,” said Governor Bryan.

He said that most churches have social media platforms and he called on leaders to use them. He said congregants should still send tithes and offering to the churches, most of whom have been negatively impacted financially because of the shutdowns or social distancing guidelines.

“Drop off your tithes early, put them in a parish box and stay home and watch from home,” he recommended to each congregant.

