

The Virgin Islands Consortium

V.I. Dept. of Health Spending Over \$7 Million Annually on 39 Mental Health/Behavioral Patients Receiving Care Outside USVI

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The V.I. Department of Health is spending over \$7 million annually to cover the cost of treatment for 39 patients from the territory receiving mental health or behavioral therapy treatment in other U.S. jurisdictions, but the plan is to have them return home because that move would reduce cost by \$2 million.

The plan was among details disclosed by Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion when she testified before the Committee on Health, Hospitals, and Human Services Wednesday. After disclosing that the department is planning to return some of the

patients, Senator Marvin Blyden asked what type of savings would be realized as a result of those individuals returning home.

"We are looking at \$4 to \$5 million annually if we are able to bring those patients back home," the commissioner responded, explaining how much the health department would spend on services annually if patients are brought back to the USVI. "Right now we pay beyond \$7 million and our budget is very tight."

The 39 patients are residents at two facilities, and of those patients, twenty-one are forensic patients. They include patients who demonstrate a need for residential treatment and are court-ordered. Currently, the outpatient clinics in the territory are serving 452 patients.

Ms. Encarnacion disclosed that a return of the patients would see increased staffing, including more nurses and psychiatric technicians, to provide patient care.

She further made known that the Behavioral Health Alcoholism and Drug Dependency Division within the Dept. of Health provides case management and oversight for 246 patients. "In addition, the division continues to respond with guidance and crisis intervention to general community mental health-related issues, including evaluation and placement of homeless individuals and community crisis counseling support through the Community Resiliency Project," she said.

The CCP program has had 29,111 contacts with residents in the territory of which 595 persons received individual counseling, 9,015 received group counseling/public education, and 19,501 of those contacts received brief educational/supportive care.

Ms. Encarnacion was at the time providing an update on Behavioral Health in the Virgin Islands as well as an overview of the use of the American Rescue Plan Act funds earmarked for public health.

Dept. of Human Services Commissioner Kimberley Causey-Gomez in her overview of the department and its homelessness programs, said that the Office of Residential and Interstate Compact Affairs manages and monitors the department's relationships with residential facilities within and outside of the territory.

She said that for 2021 D.H.S. expended \$5,763,913.59 for clients placed in out-of-territory residential treatment facilities, and \$5,376,980.59 for clients placed in residential programs locally.

Senator Janelle Sarauw requested a status on geriatric psychiatric patients, or older people who have mental health illness and are beyond the age of 60, and are unable to continue residing or be placed at the Eldra Schulterbrandt Residential Facility, a long-term care facility in St. Thomas.

"We have to look at the admission criteria for the Eldra Schulterbrandt Residential Facility, that is one of the things that we need to do. We will have to review the admission requirements; I don't see why 60 has to be the age limit, we have discussed that before so we just have to look at a policy review," Ms. Encarnacion said while informing the committee that the age limit is an internal policy that can easily be changed.

Ms. Sarauw expressed concern that the mentally ill population will live beyond 60 and there will be no proper state facility for them. She also believes that the slow pace at which rental assistance program checks are processed is resulting in some people losing their homes through eviction, which she contended can affect their mental health.

“I am asking about Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP) because it yields homelessness, it takes you to that point...and if there is no sense of urgency in moving the project along, we are going to send people on the brink of insanity,” she said while questioning testifiers from the V.I. Housing Finance Authority who were also present at the hearing and are responsible for executing the ERAP program. From just over 700 applicants to ERAP, only 195 have received assistance to date, revealed Janine Hector, director of Federal Programs at V.I.H.F.A.