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Office of Gun Violence Prevention to Treat Crime as Public Health Issue

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Shooting incident in Sept. 2015 on the Queen Mary Highway near the Central High School. By. ERNICE GILBERT/ V.I. CONSORTIUM

Antonio Emanuel, executive director of the Office of Gun Violence Prevention says his office will be treating gun violence in the U.S. Virgin Islands as a public health issue, and will be working closely with the National Network for Safety Communities.

“We are treating gun violence as a public health issue and not a law enforcement issue... However, we will work very closely with the Virgin Islands Police Department and our fellow partners as we embark upon this new approach and when I say new approach, its new for us but not new for the country,” Mr. Emanuel, who was the guest on the April 6 episode of “Inside the

Cabinet", stated.

Explaining that the Office of Gun Violence Prevention is an outreach office and not a law enforcement office, he shared with the public the method by which the office will achieve some of its objectives.

The OGVP will be working with the National Network for Safe Communities which is a research center at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York. NNSC works with communities to reduce violence, minimize arrest and incarceration, and increase trust between law enforcement and the public using data and statistics for crime prevention.

"The approach that they have created or started has shown success in major cities across the country – Boston, New York, Chicago, Washington DC, Oakland — and these outreach programs that they have created have shown different success in different cities," he said while pointing out that the program for the Virgin Islands will be adjusted for the environment.

For those who question whether what is successful on the mainland could produce similar results in the territory, Mr. Emanuel said, "We are going to commit ourselves to reduce the gun violence, the homicide in the territory. It's a priority of the Bryan/Roach administration so we have to get out there and do our work."

He said the new approach will require his office and the collaborating partners as a team to respond to the community and try to find out what are the key issues, what are the key problems, and what are the reasons why these incidents are occurring. The team will then need to come up with solutions to get to the root of the problem.

"It's a lot of work ahead for us but we are up for the task," Mr. Emanuel said as he disclosed that the governor signed an executive order requiring the office to have an advisory board.

"This advisory board is very important to the operation because what it does is it includes all of the major stakeholders in our community, and the major stakeholders are government agencies that provide services throughout the Virgin Islands," he said.

The advisory board include the Dept. of Justice, the V.I. Police Department, the Law Enforcement Planning Commission; the Office of the Territorial Public Defender, the Dept. of Labor, the Dept. of Education, the V.I. Housing Authority, the Dept. of Human Services, the Dept. of Health, the Bureau of Corrections, the V.I. National Guard, the University of the Virgin Islands, federal law enforcement partners, representatives from the nonprofit community, representatives from the religious community and representatives from the business community.

"With all those different entities sitting at the table discussing strategies and initiatives that can find ways of creating alternatives to violence, I think we might have a successful way to complete our task," he said.