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Invisible People: Territory's Homeless Population Neared 500 At Last Count

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This homeless man has been living out of a shopping cart behind Sunny Isle on St. Croix for months. By. Kareem ALEXANDER FOR VI CONSORTIUM

They are often unseen, living in the shadows of daily life. But we know they are there: the homeless in the Virgin Islands.

As of two years ago — the last official count — there were nearly 500 homeless men, women and children living in the territory, according to Gov. Albert Bryan. Whether that number is higher or lower today is unknown. The impact of mental illness on homelessness, however, is clear.

According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, serious mental illness disrupts people's ability to perform the basic functions of life, such as obtaining and managing a household. It may

also prevent people from building healthy, stable relationships with others, and often prevents them from acting in a rational manner.

In 2018, the Virgin Islands Continuum of Care, a project of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (H.U.D.) and Mr. Bryan's data source, identified 498 people living without permanent housing. More than half of them were characterized as experiencing "chronic homelessness." The National Alliance to End Homelessness defines chronic homelessness as an individual who has been homeless for at least a year — or repeatedly homeless — while struggling with a disabling condition such as serious mental illness, a substance abuse disorder or physical disability.

Among the territory's homeless population, as of two years ago, were 26 families without permanent housing. Twenty-four homeless individuals were military veterans, and four were young adults between 18 and 24 years old.

Gov. Bryan on Thursday announced [major reforms](#) to the USVI's mental health treatment systems. The sweeping changes, the governor said, would address gaps in services to residents who suffer from behavioral health challenges, mental health disorders, developmental disabilities, alcoholism and drug dependence. The associated legislation — called the Virgin Islands Behavioral Health and Developmental Disability Act — would create the territory's first mental health and substance abuse treatment facility. It also calls for interdepartmental coordination between the courts, government agencies, non-profits and other stakeholders to address Virgin Islanders mental health needs.

Over the past year, the central government has hired a director of mental health and mental health specialist within the Department of Health. The behavioral health "Clubhouse" [opened on St. Croix](#), providing group and individual mental health assessments, therapeutic sessions. The Eldra Schulterbrandt Long Term Care Residential Behavioral Health Facility [reopened on St. Thomas](#). And outpatient services are offered in both districts at Behavioral Health Alcoholism and Drug Dependency clinics.

"Housing and mental health services are the keys to addressing the needs of people experiencing homelessness, and for the first time we are putting significant resources to work to address these basic needs," Mr. Bryan said. The governor called on the 33rd Legislature to approve the measure, stating, "The current system is failing and neglecting some of our most vulnerable residents, and it is time for that to change."