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Dept. of Health Concerned That Not Enough People Taking Monkeypox Vaccine in USVI

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While many countries around the world remain in a sluggish queue to obtain monkeypox vaccines, health authorities in the U.S. Virgin Islands are concerned that not many people are volunteering to take the vaccine, even as cases in the United States continue to climb.

“We are not seeing the public response as we’d hoped,” said V.I. Dept. of Health Assistant Commissioner Reuben Molloy.

As of September 27, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that 25,162 cases of monkeypox have been identified in the U.S and 66 new cases were detected as of last Wednesday.

The USVI is a major hub to and from the United States, where monkeypox has been identified in all 50 states as of August. Still, in the USVI only 20 people were fully vaccinated against the virus and 57 more were awaiting their second dose as of Monday, according to Mr. Molloy.

The vaccines, which he said was “safe and effective” are being provided to residents free of charge. There are currently 603 doses of the JYNNEOS vaccine available which has proven to be the most effective in treating both monkeypox and smallpox.

Although monkeypox is not considered a sexually transmitted disease, anyone can become ill from it and the CDC reports that more than 99 percent of monkeypox cases in the United States in 2022 outbreak have been among men who have sex with men.

Mr. Molloy therefore urged persons who fall within the most vulnerable groups to become inoculated. These groups of people include lab workers and other healthcare professionals like urgent care staff and EMS personnel, men who have sex with men, or anyone considered high risk who would have had multiple sexual partners, used drugs during sex or have contracted syphilis, gonorrhea, chlamydia, Trichomoniasis (STI) or any other acute sexually transmitted infection within the last three months.

The high-risk list, he said, also includes individuals who have been incarcerated, attended a sex party or visited a group sex site and sex workers.

In an effort to increase vaccination, over the next two weeks, D.O.H. Communicable Disease Division is expected to conduct an assessment based on calls made to the monkeypox hotline.

“Callers will be evaluated to determine their eligibility for the vaccine. If a caller is found to not be presently eligible, they will be placed in a listing for the second tier of vaccinations,” stated Mr. Molloy.

According to the assistant commissioner, the population included in the first tier of vaccinations is those at high risk for infection of monkeypox. Persons wanting to become inoculated against monkeypox are encouraged to call the hotline at 340-774-900 ext 4663.

Meanwhile, in a bid to expand healthcare services, this Wednesday, the Virgin Islands Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women Infants and Children (WIC) will break ground on its new headquarters in St. Thomas, five years after the original building was damaged by Hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017. The \$3.7 million facility will provide centralized services to pregnant and breast-feeding mothers, non-breastfeeding post-partum women as well as infants and children up to age 5, Mr. Molloy said.

He also announced that the abatement and demolition work for the Charles Harwood Memorial Complex on St Croix was approved by the Coastal Zone Management Board on September, 20, signaling the start of the \$291 million contract to rebuild the facility as a community health clinic and wellness center.

Mr. Molloy was speaking during this week’s Government House Press Briefing and Covid Update.