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Groundbreaking Marks Start of Transformation of New Knud Hansen Complex; Facility to be Completed Sept. 2023

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Public and private sector officials, including Governor Albert Bryan and officials from contractor J. Benton, participated in the groundbreaking event for the Knud Hansen Complex in St. Thomas on Sept. 28, 2022. By. GOV'T HOUSE

The Virgin Islands Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women Infants and Children (WIC) broke ground on the demolition on Wednesday, signaling the start of construction work for J. Benton Construction which has been hired as the general contractor for the building.

“This project will provide a new home for the WIC program so that it may continue to deliver health nutrition services to underserved women, infants and children,” remarked Eric Cusin, vice

president and project executive at J. Benton Construction.

When completed, the \$3.7 million restored two-story concrete Knud Hansen Complex will serve as the primary location for the WIC program in the St. Thomas/St. John District.

Anticipated to open in September 2023, the 5,000 sq. ft hurricane-resistant health facility located at Hospital Ground, will serve thousands of pregnant, post-partum mothers, breast-feeding women and infants and according to Health Commissioner Justa E. Encarnacion, entire families will benefit from the new facility as well.

"I know not just the building but everything that goes on inside that building is actually going to be a benefit to every one of our children and parents," she said during the groundbreaking ceremony.

Bryan Dittmeier, senior director for public policy at the National WIC Association said one day the center will be the "focal point" of the WIC program in the U.S Virgin Islands and provide "lifesaving intervention."

"As the islands endure repeated extreme weather events, we know that nutrition assistance programs and other public health need resilient weather-proof buildings so that we can continue to provide out services and to support the families in the islands during these natural disasters," he said.

"WIC is associated with reduced rates of childhood obesity and infant mortality, particularly for infants and children of color as well as increased breastfeeding initiation rates and healthier pregnancy, birth and child nutrition outcomes," Mr. Dittmeier added.

The old WIC building had to be vacated in 2004 due to extensive damage to the roof but budget issues had hindered the repair work which needed to be done at that time, resulting in further damage to it from weather events including Hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017.

However, the project was since awarded funding through the U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service Program (USDA FNS), which is assigned to assist with the repair and restoration of buildings, equipment, technology, and other infrastructure damages as a consequence of Hurricanes Irma and Maria. Once completed, the facility will include the St. Thomas WIC clinic, executive offices, classrooms, and storage.

"The Knud Hansen project is just one example of your tremendous efforts in ensuring the people of the U.S. Virgin Islands have access to the services they need," remarked Christine Wormuth Ag. Regional Administrator of the North East Regional Office of the USDA FNS in a video message.

According to Lorna Concepcion, the director of the WIC program, "Our staff and clients will truly be appreciative as it is all for ensuring that we are in a pleasant safe environment, which would allow us to give the optimum [care] and continue to provide healthy starts to some of our most precious citizens — the infants and young children of this territory who are our future."

In attendance were various government representatives as well as Governor Albert Bryan Jr. and Lieutenant Governor Tregenza Roach.