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## V.I. Dept. of Health on Drive to Reduce Health Inequity Using \$3 Million CDC Grant

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**Panelists at the V.I. Dept. of Health's Health Equity Summit on St. Croix on Tues. Nov. 29, 2022. By. V.I. DEPT. OF HEALTH**

Increasing opportunities to access quality healthcare and to lessen the gaps that reduce a person's chances of living a healthy life were the focus areas of the first Health Equity Summit held on St. Croix Tuesday.

The V.I. Department of Health brought together various medical, health and insurance partners to discuss the root causes of healthcare disparity and ways to possibly improve the mortality rate in the territory.

According to 2020 Census data shared at the summit, the leading causes of death in the U.S. Virgin Islands were heart disease, cancer, Alzheimer's, diabetes and assault or homicide.

Dr. Lyna Fredericks, territorial director of chronic diseases at the Dept. of Health said that the rates of high cholesterol are driving cases of heart disease in the Virgin Islands.

High cholesterol which is a key risk factor to heart disease is most prevalent in persons aged 18-24 and 25-34, with females leading, she said.

"It shows why heart disease is the number one killer in the territory," Ms. Fredericks remarked.

Health inequity prevents many people from accessing the health services that they need. The discussions showed that inequity can be related to a number of factors including education, policy and income level.

Dr. Noreen Michael, director/research associate professor at the University of the Virgin Islands said that there is an inverse relationship of healthcare based on educational and income because people with less education are more likely to experience health risks and are likely to be unable to access proper care because of their low income.

Using diabetes as an example, Ms. Michael said the data suggests that Virgin Islanders are "worst off" than residents on the mainland in diabetes rates.

According to the 2020 Census report, people without formal education (high school diploma) were two times more likely to be diagnosed with diabetes.

"So, persons earning between \$15,000 and \$24,999 [have an] 11.9 percent prevalence compared to just the general public in the U.S.," she said.

It also does not help that 11.8 percent of the USVI population live below the poverty line which reduces their access to medical resources.

Two of the panelists addressed federal issues that have systematically hampered access to proper health services in the USVI.

Duane Howell, executive director at Access to Racial and Cultural Health (ARCH) Institute, said historically territories were not seen as geographic priority areas by federal agencies and as such have been underserved. He said it is one of the major problems affecting equity for all demographics especially youth.

Dr. Brittany Dawson, a nurse practitioner and advanced practice midwife posited that deficiencies in federal laws with regard to healthcare are indicators of colonial practices that islanders receive from the United States.

"We're at a place where we're losing the heart of community due to our lack of resources because we're not treated equitably as a community by the United States of America," she stressed.

The Dept. of Health plans to roll out a program to therefore support existing initiatives and introduce new methods to achieve healthcare that is inclusive and equitable for all Virgin Islanders.

For example, by June 2023, the department wants to reduce obesity among African American and Hispanic women in the USVI from 35.6 percent to 34 percent by implementing the Eat Healthy,

Be Active Community Workshop. This category of residents is at the highest risk of obesity in the territory.

The summit was made possible through a Centers for Disease Control grant, the Health Disparities Program under which the Dept. of Health was awarded funding of \$3.1 million in June 2021.

The Health Equity Summit will also be held in St. Thomas on Friday, December 2.

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