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Tsunami Sirens in USVI Won't Be Ready Until September, VITEMA Director Says

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Waves approach Miyako City after a 9.0 magnitude earthquake impacted Japan. The tsunami led to more than 15,000 deaths. By. MAINICHI SHIMBUN/REUTERS FILE

The Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency said during a town hall meeting held at the D.C. Canegata Recreational Center Tuesday night that the 44 tsunami warning horns spread about the Virgin Islands to jolt residents in case of an imminent tsunami threat — which have been inoperable since Hurricanes Irma and Maria ravaged the territory in 2017 — will not be ready until September.

"The tsunami sirens are not active... give me six months to get them active. And believe you me there's lots of testing going on so you understand what that tone is," Mr. Jaschen said during the

town hall, according to a [VITEMA livestream](#) of the event.

The Caribbean region has been experiencing higher than normal earthquake activity that register significantly on the Richter scale. Puerto Rico, for example, has experienced multiple earthquakes in the past month registering above magnitude 6.0, and numerous magnitude 5.0 and higher. And just yesterday, a monster earthquake that registered at magnitude 7.7 [impacted the waters between Jamaica and Cuba](#), affecting not only the aforementioned islands, but also the Cayman Islands and as far as south Florida.

[\[Watch: Magnitude 7.7 Earthquake Causes Sinkholes in the Cayman Islands\]](#)

VITEMA has been hosting the town halls to educate residents on the threat of earthquakes and tsunamis, and the preparatory action that it's taking — along with actions residents themselves should take in case of an emergency. The town halls continue in St. Thomas on February 4 at 6:00 p.m. at the Ivanna Eudora Kean High School; February 5 at 6:00 p.m. at the Charlotte Amalie High School; and February 7 at 6:00 p.m. at the University of the Virgin Islands.

The director took a number of questions at last night's town hall, including whether a tsunami could occur without being triggered by an earthquake, to which Mr. Jaschen said a powerful meteorite impacting the ocean could trigger one. He said volcanoes, as part of an eruption, could also trigger tsunamis. Additionally, Mr. Jaschen said even the smaller earthquakes [can trigger what is called an underwater landslide](#), which in turn could trigger dangerous tsunamis.

During the town hall, VITEMA demonstrated what the sirens would sound like. The first sound can be likened to the deep, loud hunk of a trailer truck, and the second resembling that of emergency sirens of ambulances but slower. Mr. Jaschen said VITEMA was finalizing a contract and that the installation process would be completed by September.

In March 2019, the Federal Emergency Management Agency [obligated \\$1.6 million](#) to the U.S. Virgin Islands for the tsunami early warning system. FEMA said then that work would start on the system in June of the same year. "Beginning June 2019, the system will undergo a full refurbishment to replace and harden many of the key components damaged by the storms. To protect against future severe weather events, wooden support poles will be replaced with steel poles rated two classes higher in strength, heavy-duty solar panels and brackets will be mounted, and robust tensioned cables will add structural stability," FEMA said.

FEMA said the system was being modernized for compatibility with the Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS), the U.S.'s alert and warning infrastructure, an integration FEMA said will boost the systems capabilities to notify and alert the public of many other potential catastrophic events, including hurricanes, earthquakes and other weather-related traumas.