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Opioid Crisis Not Occurring in USVI, But Health Officials Prepare Just in Case

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V.I. Department of Health Officials, during testimony at a meeting of the Senate Committee on Health, Hospitals and Human services last week, discussed the state of care and treatment for opioid addiction in the territory.

The committee, led by Chair Senator Ray Fonseca, highlighted the urgent need to address, within the territory, the opioid crisis unfolding nationally. "The goal is to save lives," he stated, inquiring of DOH officials their thoughts on whether fentanyl testing equipment and supplies should remain illegal despite its potential to prevent overdose deaths.

Department of Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion, while not addressing the question directly, said that although the territory has not been particularly seriously affected by opioids, her

department has already begun working on modernizing its approach to treatment for opioid addiction. "Prevention truly is the best method," she said. "But tracking and data collection...is one of the ways in which we can actually prevent the disease."

Renan Steele, deputy commissioner of Public Health at DOH, spoke of plans to transition from methadone to newer forms of Medication-Assisted Treatment (MAT), including buprenorphine and Vivitrol, which have shown higher success rates in treating opioid addiction.

The issue of easy access to Narcan (naloxone), a life-saving drug that can reverse the effects of an opioid overdose, was also addressed. Currently, this medication requires a prescription in the Virgin Islands, a requirement that Mr. Fonseca expressed interest in changing. Ms. Encarnacion said that the drug is readily available, adding that her department has been working for months to train law enforcement and other agencies in Narcan treatment.

D.O.H. also has a program that allows for distribution of Narcan, and in the future they intend to ensure that "every law enforcement vehicle [has] Narcan available... in the field," according to Ms. Steele.

However, to make Narcan available without prescription requires legislative action, an issue Ms. Encarnacion said she was willing to work together with Sen. Fonseca's office to address.

Encarnacion also pointed out that D.O.H. is seeking approval for funding to monitor drug prescription programs, which will help it track each prescription and its use. The goal is to gain a deeper understanding of the opioid problem and to prevent potential overdoses, according to health officials.