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USVI Unveils Joint Patient Assessment and Tracking System To Improve Patient Management in Evacuation Scenarios

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Hospital patients from the Schneider Regional Medical Center were transfered to the Juan F. Luis Hospital by air transport following Hurricane Irma's devastation on St. Thomas and St. John on Sept. 6, 2017. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

The V.I. Department of Health held a press conference on Wednesday with local and regional disaster management partners to announce the implementation of the Joint Patient Assessment and Tracking System (JPATS) in the territory, which will serve to manage and follow patient movements in evacuation scenarios.

VITEMA Director Daryl Jacschen reflected on how disaster response has changed following Hurricanes Irma and Maria since 2017. He said the territory learned "some tough lessons as part of the preparation and response to the two Category Five " storms.

Mr. Jaschen noted that the subsequent government response led to executive and legislative action, out of which came Act 8151, which made provision for the off-island evacuation and long-term care of medical patients. He highlighted the collaboration with various departments, hospitals, and federal agencies. "Now it's one thing to put it in the code. It's in the plan," Jaschen stated, going on to introduce JPATS, sponsored by the U.S. Health and Human Services, as part of that plan.

Patient Evacuation Lead Jeannette Guzman focused in on the crucial aspect of patient tracking. "Before Hurricane Irma and Maria, I truly didn't understand what kidney disease was, and what it took to remain alive with limited treatment resources," she admitted. Guzman outlined how JPATS uses a barcode system on bracelets to track patient movements, saying, "this will improve our territory's disaster response capabilities so that you and I know where our families are after a natural or manmade disaster." The training for the new system will be conducted with various health and emergency response organizations in the territory, beginning on Thursday.

Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion noted that moving patients from one facility to another is not necessarily new to healthcare practitioners in the territory. "We do that daily – both hospitals transfer patients. So it's something that we practice on an ongoing basis," she noted. However, she highlighted the significance of the new system for high-risk individuals in an emergency scenario, including dialysis patients, the elderly, critically ill neonates, and pregnant women, she said, noting the importance of communication, care, and safety in the evacuation process.

The introduction of JPATS is considered a significant step in enhancing the Virgin Islands' ability to respond to disasters, ensuring that life-saving patient movement and evacuation are conducted efficiently. The collective sentiments of the officials who gathered on Thursday to announce the launch of JPATS underscored the importance of preparation, collaboration, and technological advancements in safeguarding the health and well-being of the community.