



**GOVERNMENT OF  
THE VIRGIN ISLANDS OF THE UNITED STATES**

**VIRGIN ISLANDS DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH**

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**For Immediate Release**

February 24, 2020

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**Health Department and VITEMA Lead Operation Pan-Prepared Tabletop Exercise**

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**U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI)** – The Department of Health, in conjunction with the Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency (VITEMA), organized a tabletop exercise last week to bring relevant agencies together to assess the readiness of the Virgin Islands public health and healthcare systems to respond to a public health emergency. This exercise identified areas of strength and opportunities to strengthen the territorial response to a potential outbreak.

Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion and VITEMA Director Daryl Jaschen collaborated on ‘Operation Pan-Prepared’, a six-hour tabletop exercise on Friday, February 21st, that allowed for open discussions with various government agencies and private sector partners. The desired outcome was a more structured territorial preparedness plan and many key areas were addressed.

“This process brought together a wide cross-section of the territory’s agencies and private sector partners to practice a simulated response to a potential case of an infectious respiratory disease outbreak, such as COVID-19,” said Commissioner Encarnacion. “Through continued collaboration, the USVI has addressed some of our potential gaps and shortfalls.”

As the lead public health official for the territory, Commissioner Encarnacion has been coordinating an interagency COVID-19 task force that meets weekly to discuss international and national updates, and the territory’s level of preparedness.

“VITEMA is committed to bringing all necessary stakeholders to the table for this collaborative process,” said Director Jaschen. “We are confident in our ability to respond should an outbreak impact the territory.”

Other agencies that participated in last week’s successful exercise include: Virgin Islands National Guard, Virgin Islands Port Authority, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, U.S. Coast Guard, Juan F. Luis Hospital, Schneider Regional Medical Center, Emergency Medical Services, Department of Labor’s Division of Occupational Safety and Health, Department of Public Works, Department of Education, Department of Property and Procurement, Department of Human Services, Department of Licensing and Consumer Affairs, Department of Finance, Virgin Islands Fire Service, Virgin Islands Police Department, Virgin Islands Bureau of Information Technology, Bureau of Internal Revenue, Office of the Lieutenant Governor, Virgin Islands Judiciary, Office of the Delegate to Congress, West Indian Company Limited, Virgin Islands Hotel and Tourism Association and Limetree Bay Terminals.

The Health Department’s Director of Public Health Preparedness Francine Lang and Territorial Epidemiologist Dr. Esther Ellis are working with the Juan F. Luis Hospital, Schneider Regional Medical Center and other healthcare partners to ensure consistencies in staff education, training, reporting and capacity-building. Another key priority is addressing protocols for the points of entry into the territory.

Health Department officials remain in constant communication with health officials in Puerto Rico, the British Virgin Islands, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to stay abreast of latest news and plans for preventing the spread of COVID-19.

“This tabletop exercise was an opportunity to tap into the partnerships that exist within the territory to address any potential public health emergency and demonstrate a whole-of-community approach to emergency response,” said Director of Public Health Preparedness Francine Lang.

Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion advises residents that while COVID-19 should be taken seriously, residents should also take precautions to avoid the spread of influenza by getting the flu vaccine, washing hands regularly with soap and warm water, covering your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing, using a flexed elbow when coughing, and avoiding close contact with anyone with cold or flu-like symptoms.

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