



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

VIRGIN ISLANDS DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

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For Immediate Release

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**Department of Health Hosts Estate Whim Community Preparedness
Tabletop Exercise**

ST. CROIX, USVI (March 11, 2020) — The VI Department of Health officials joined forces with government agencies, community organizations and Estate Whim representatives for the “We for Us” tabletop exercise at the University of the Virgin Islands on Thursday, March 5, 2020.

Sandra I. Charles, Deputy Director of the Public Health Preparedness Program, welcomed attendees and said, “This project provides an unprecedented opportunity for government officials, community and faith-based organizations and residents to collaborate in the disaster planning process and strengthen our culture of preparedness. She added, “The Department of Health envisions this project being applied to other community preparedness efforts throughout the territory.”

The “Plan to Prepare” project is a community-based approach to reducing the risk of hurricane related deaths and injuries in the U.S. Virgin Islands. The pilot project targets those under 5 and over 65 years of age because these individuals are especially at risk. The goal is to minimize their vulnerability to future disasters by building capacity to increase their preparedness.

The Department of Health selected the St. Croix Estate Whim community for this project because it is located on the South western side of the island which was heavily impacted by Hurricane Maria. That factor, in addition to the area’s economics and the high population of seniors and children, were key determinants in selecting Estate Whim.

In April 2019, the Health Department held a community meeting with residents, non-profits and government entities to assess and identify disaster-related health risks in the Estate Whim area. Then in October, health department officials briefed VI Territorial Emergency Management Agency (VITEMA) personnel and members of the Emergency Management Committee (EMC) about the project during a regularly scheduled EMC monthly meeting.

In November, Estate Whim residents and other community leaders gathered at the University of the Virgin Islands for a two-day community based facilitated planning workshop and drafted a plan focused on safe evacuation and sheltering. This event was the precursor to the “We for Us” tabletop exercise where the plan was validated.

Discussions are now underway between the Department of Health and the St. Croix Long Term Recovery Group (LTRG)/Voluntary Organizations Active In Disaster (VOAD) to determine who will lead the project moving forward.

According to LTRG Executive Director of Community Engagement, Delia Richardson who co-facilitated the tabletop exercise, “The VOAD sees this initiative as directly aligning with our mission to provide effective relief and recovery services to St. Croix residents. We look forward to spearheading this effort.”

Plans are now underway for the “Plan to Protect” Disaster Preparedness Expo in June 2020. Additionally, a report detailing the findings and planning process will be available for dissemination by July 2020.

This project is a result of public and private partnerships. The Department of Health is working collaboratively with Federal and local government agencies in addition to community and faith-based organizations. For more information contact, Community Engagement Coordinator, Laurie Christian at 718 – 1311 Ext. 3847.

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