



35TH LEGISLATURE OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

The Honorable Senator Ray Fonseca

Chair

COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, HOSPITALS AND HUMAN SERVICES

Testimony

Virgin Islands Department of Health

Commissioner Justa E. Encarnacion, RN, BSN, MBA/HCM

1 Good day, Honorable Senator Ray Fonseca, Chair of Committee on Health Hospitals and Human
2 Services, Honorable Senator Kenneth L. Gittens, Vice-Chair, committee members and all other
3 members of the 35th Legislature of the Virgin Islands of the United States and the listening and
4 viewing audience. I am Justa “Tita” Encarnacion, Commissioner of the Virgin Islands Department
5 of Health. I have with me today my Assistant Commissioners Dr. Nicole Craigwell-Syms and
6 Reuben Molloy, Chief Financial Officer Tatia Monelle-Hewitt, Deputy Commissioner of Human
7 Resources Joan Jean-Baptiste, Deputy Commissioner of Public Health Services Renan Steele and
8 Chief Procurement Officer Derese Harley as well as other members of the Department of Health
9 joining via Teams. Today, we will provide an update of our department, programs, and services
10 throughout the Territory.

11 Title 3, Title 19, and Title 27 of the Virgin Islands Code prescribe that the Virgin Islands
12 Department of Health is responsible for providing public health services to the people of this
13 Territory, which involves protecting and improving the health of our community through health
14 promotion and preventative initiatives. Preventative measures are widely recognized as key
15 components of efforts to improve overall health and reduce health care costs, particularly related to
16 chronic disease. The Department of Health functions as the state regulatory agency and the
17 territorial public health agency for the USVI. The department comprises the Office of the
18 Commissioner and six bureaus that oversee twenty-six programs, all of which are operational.
19 Additionally, as the lead agency for Emergency Services Function 8 or (ESF-8), the department also
20 oversees hospitals during a declared emergency or disaster. As the COVID pandemic continues to
21 wane into endemicity, we continue to provide support and guidance to our GVI partners and public
22 by providing essential health services. We thank our federal partners and will continue to
23 collaborate with them on public health policies that address “Long Covid,” a condition that has
24 affected millions of Americans. Virgin Islanders have also been affected.

25 **The Office of the Commissioner**

26 Public health initiatives are primarily aimed at reducing health disparities and improving the quality
27 of life for all individuals, regardless of their age, gender, socio-economic status, or geographical
28 location.

29 Core functions of public health include:

1 1. Assessment: Identifying and analyzing health issues through surveillance and the systematic
2 collection of data on the prevalence, severity, and determinants of health problems. This enables
3 public health professionals to prioritize needs and formulate appropriate strategies to address them.
4 The Department's Strategic Plan, Community Health Assessment, Community Health Improvement
5 Plan and most recently, our 2022 Epi Annual Report can be found on our website at doh.vi.gov
6 (reports and plans) Reports and Plans | USVI Department of Health.

7 2. Policy development: Formulating and advocating for policies that promote health and combat
8 social determinants of illness. This involves the collaboration between different stakeholders,
9 including lawmakers, public health practitioners, businesses, and non-governmental organizations
10 to identify potential barriers and implement solutions.

11 3. Assurance: Ensuring that all community members have access to high-quality, essential health
12 services and protection and the continuous evaluation of their effectiveness and improvement.

13 Exemplary Performance by the Virgin Islands Department of Health team includes:

14 1. Promoting Preventative Care: The department has been proactive in promoting preventive care
15 measures, raising awareness about the importance of regular screenings, vaccinations, and healthy
16 lifestyle choices. Your initiatives have empowered individuals to take charge of their well-being
17 and make informed decisions regarding their health.

18 2. Community Outreach and Education: The department's dedication to community engagement and
19 education is commendable. Through various outreach programs, workshops, and informational
20 campaigns, the department has effectively disseminated valuable health information, fostering a
21 culture of health literacy within our community.

22 3. Emergency Preparedness and Response: The department has displayed exceptional preparedness
23 and swift response during times of crisis. Our team's coordination efforts, collaboration with other
24 agencies, and strategic planning have been instrumental in ensuring the safety and well-being of our
25 community during emergencies and public health crises.

26 4. Collaboration and Partnerships: Our commitment to fostering partnerships with healthcare
27 providers, community organizations, and stakeholders has increased the department's ability to

1 deliver comprehensive and coordinated care. These collaborative efforts have resulted in innovative
2 programs, improved access to healthcare services, and strengthened healthcare systems.

3 5. Continuous Quality Improvement: The department's commitment to ongoing quality
4 improvement is evident in its pursuit of excellence across all areas of operation. Through data-
5 driven approaches, evidence-based practices, and regular evaluation, the department consistently
6 strives to enhance service delivery and outcomes, ensuring the highest standard of care for our
7 community. VIDOH works closely with the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to measure
8 and improve identified Key Performance Indicators.

9 We address public health as well as population health. It is our responsibility as government leaders,
10 policymakers, and public health professionals to identify, investigate, and address the root causes of
11 health disparities and work collaboratively to create a healthier, more equitable society.

12 **The Office of Procurement and Contracts Management & Reporting**

13 The Office of Procurement and Contracts Management and Reporting (OPCMR) facilitates the
14 procurement process for goods and/or services, as well as leases for the department, and ensures
15 adherence to all the established policies and procedures of the Virgin Islands Department of
16 Property and Procurement (DPP), in a centralized manner. Since the establishment of the OPCMR,
17 the department has participated in eight (8) GVI-wide contracts with various vendors for services
18 including but not limited to, janitorial, exterminating, purchase of household/cleaning supplies,
19 security system and/or guard services. The unit has coordinated efforts with DPP to approve
20 agreements attached to monthly, recurring charges for FY 2023-FY 2024. Twenty (20) agreements
21 were fully executed. The same will be done for FY 2024-FY2025. The coordinated effort also
22 resulted in the execution of sixty-two (62) contracts department-wide, ten (10) expired contracts in
23 the first half of Calendar Year 2023 and five (5) that will expire by December 31, 2023. Some of the
24 agreements were three (3) to six (6) months; some have expired but were nonetheless executed.
25 Currently, there are sixty-three (63) items on the list of pending agreements/solicitations and
26 twenty-four (24) pending leases that the unit is working on. There are eleven (11) executed leases:
27 four (4) on St. Thomas and seven (7) in St. Croix.

1 **Bureau of Financial Services**

2 The Department of Health's FY 2023 General Fund Budget is twenty-five million, seven hundred
3 eighty-one thousand, nine hundred seventeen dollars (\$25,781,917.00) and our total Health
4 Revolving Fund Budget is three million, one hundred thirty-six dollars (\$3,000,136.00).

5 **The Office of Federal Grants Management**

6 The Office of Federal Grants Management is presently overseeing 65 projects, with 84 single
7 budgets, 18 since the pandemic. The department has been awarded 34 individual COVID-19 grants.
8 The awarding programs are Epidemiology, Laboratory Capacity for Infectious Diseases Ryan White
9 Care Act Title II, Immunization Vaccine Program, Maternal Child Health (MCH) Program, Mental
10 Health and Substance Abuse Services, Public Health Emergency Preparedness, and the National
11 Initiative to Address COVID-19 Health Disparities Among Populations at High-risk and
12 Underserved, Including Racial and Ethnic Minority Populations and Rural Communities grant
13 program. The total Federal Budget awarded to the Department was eighty-seven million, two-
14 hundred thirty-four thousand, five hundred and twenty-eight dollars (\$87,234,528.00).

15 **Bureau of Human Resources and Labor Relations**

16 The Human Resources (HR) Division works to increase the level of efficiency throughout the
17 agency by improving its functions. Our HR Division is working collaboratively with the
18 Department of Personnel and other external agencies to improve our process flow and yield
19 improved outcomes. We will continue to build the team territory- wide as we encourage our and
20 mentor our Human Resources team to prepare themselves for upward mobility within Human
21 Resources.

22 As we proceed with our work, we are actively engaging with the Office of Collective Bargaining,
23 the PERB (Public Employment Relations Board), the Department of Justice, and the respective
24 unions to address all labor relations cases. Currently, there are twelve (12) ongoing labor relations
25 cases as of May 31st. Our commitment remains strong as we collaborate with the unions to seek
26 resolutions for these grievances. The documents that reflect the salary increases for the Registered
27 Nurses have been completed and forwarded to OMB.

1 **The Bureau of Public Health Services**

2 **Public Health Preparedness Division**

3 The Division of Public Health Preparedness is a fully federally funded division focused on
4 enhancing the territory's public health and healthcare systems capacity to prepare for and respond to
5 public health emergencies.

6 The Public Health Emergency Preparedness Cooperative Agreement and Hospital Preparedness
7 Program Cooperative Agreement provide the national standards for building a resilient and prepared
8 healthcare and public health system, respectively.

9 Within the last year, the Public Health Preparedness Division has collaborated locally with VI
10 Territorial Emergency Management Agency (VITEMA), Federal Emergency Management Agency
11 (FEMA), Administration for Preparedness and Response (ASPR), and the Centers for Disease
12 Control and Prevention (CDC), alongside other local partners to strengthen territory's Patient
13 Evacuation/ Patient Movement Annex and Medical Special Needs Shelter Plan. Through this
14 collaboration, the division continues to work internally and externally, with other GVI agencies, to
15 socialize the plan and ensure all stakeholders are aware of their responsibilities.

16 The Public Health Preparedness Division manages the Departmental Emergency Operations Center
17 (DEOC), reviews and manages all departmental preparedness and response plans, and tracks the
18 department's completion of the basic Incident Command System courses.

19

20 **Behavioral Health Division**

21 National Governors Challenge

22 In 2021, the Department joined the Office of Veterans Affairs and other districts as National
23 Governors and Mayors Challenge members. In June 2023, seven (7) behavioral health and the
24 communicable diseases staff members, in collaboration with the Office of Veterans Affairs, will
25 travel to DC to participate in the Governor's Challenge to Prevent Suicide Among Service
26 Members, Veterans and their Families Implementation Academy. This partnership with the Office
27 of Veterans Affairs and SAMHSA, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration,

1 began over a year ago whereby a strategic action plan and logic model were created to identify the
2 strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to the infrastructure, resources, policies, and
3 practices that influence the effectiveness of service delivery to veterans and their family members.
4 The VA's Director of Behavioral Health based in Puerto Rico and the VI National Guard are our
5 newest members of the Families Implementation Academy.

6 BH Outpatient Clinics

7 Between November 2022 and April 2023, a total of 790 patients received services at outpatient
8 clinics between St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix. Patients received one-to-one therapy, case
9 management, methadone services, medication management, Clubhouse membership, and substance
10 use services.

11 Mental Health Awareness Month

12 During Mental Health Awareness Month in May 2023, the community witnessed a range of
13 activities emphasizing the significance of mental well-being focused on reducing "emotional pain".
14 Here are highlights of each event:

- 15 ○ In both districts, students were educated about substance use and the opioid epidemic,
16 receiving valuable information on these topics.
- 17 ○ The entire division provided support to staff members by organizing art therapy sessions led
18 by Eliana Schuster-Brown from Eliana B Artistry. These sessions aimed to prevent burnout
19 among the staff. Close to 200 staff members participated territory-wide via Teams.
- 20 ○ The Division of Behavioral Health, in collaboration with Michelle McGowan, a licensed
21 clinical social worker at Synergy Fitness and Wellness Center, hosted a Lunch with Leaders
22 event. During this gathering, the community had the opportunity to learn about burnout
23 prevention strategies.
- 24 ○ Residents at the Eldra Schulerbrandt facility engaged in a delightful game night and tie-
25 dyeing activity, joined by staff and visitors.
- 26 ○ The Division of Behavioral Health, in partnership with the Government Access Channel, the
27 Office of Gun Violence Prevention, and Ms. Amenti Phillip, the reigning Miss St. Croix
28 Educational Complex, organized "Mindfulness Mondays." These community conversations

1 addressed various mental wellness topics such as suicide prevention, gun violence
2 prevention, bullying, and healthy relationships.

3 ○ The month concluded with a night of Music Therapy in both districts, providing the
4 community with the chance to explore the benefits of music therapy, including self-
5 expression, motivation, and stress reduction.

6 GVI Partnerships

7 In 2022, the Division of Behavioral Health has led the charge with the Governor’s “Our Best Life”
8 initiative in multiple ways. In collaboration with the Department of Sports, Parks and Recreation,
9 the Division hosted “Total Wuk” Wednesdays in which Zumba fitness was used to promote
10 psychological wellbeing, help relieve stress, improve cognitive skills, and prevent cardiovascular
11 disease. Zumba sessions were immediately followed by mindfulness meditation in which the
12 community was asked to connect their mind to their body to calm the body and bring awareness to
13 the mind-body connection.

14 Between 2022 and 2023, the division collaborated with the departments of Education, Human
15 Services, Labor, Agriculture and Licensing and Consumer Affairs to provide grief counseling,
16 trauma interventions, substance use education, stress management interventions.

17 Outreach and education services were spread throughout St. Thomas, St. John and St. Croix with
18 three thousand eight hundred and seventy-four (3,874) contacts made with students from the Ivanna
19 Eudora Kean High School, Charlotte Amalie High School, Addelita Cancryn Middle School,
20 Juanita Gardine School, St. Croix Educational Complex, John H. Woodson School, St. Croix
21 Central High School, Pearl B. Larsen School, Eulalie Rivera and Lew Muckle elementary schools,
22 and the University of the Virgin Islands. The outreach also included Giffit Hill School on St. John
23 and youth participating in the ARCH Institute.

24 In June 2023, staff partnered with the Virgin Islands Department of Education to record 30 second
25 ads on the radio that covered topics such as teen mental health, bully prevention, substance use
26 prevention and safety, coping with stress. The ads are slated to run throughout the summer and into
27 the 2023-2024 school year as a mean of reaching the youth in our community and providing them
28 with strategies to manage their mental health in a culture that still stigmatizes treatment and lacks
29 resources.

1 Residential Patient Services

2 Currently there are twenty-five (25) individuals at the Eldra Schulerbrant facility and forty-three
3 (43) individuals in off-island care. Twenty-five (25) of the forty-three (43) individuals off island are
4 in forensic placements. Six (6) patients have been reunited with their families, returned to
5 independent living from residential care, or had their court hearings closed in preparation for
6 discharge this fiscal year.

7 Federal Partners

8 In December 2022 and May 2023, the Division hosted multiple federal partners to include the
9 Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), Addiction Technology
10 Transfer Centers (ATTC), Mental Health Technology Transfer Centers (MHTTC), Prevention
11 Technology Transfer Centers (PTTC). The purpose of the Technology Transfer Centers (TTC) is to
12 develop and strengthen the specialized behavioral healthcare and primary healthcare workforce that
13 provides prevention, treatment, and recovery support services for substance use disorder (SUD) and
14 mental illness.

15 In April 2023, SAMHSA program monitor conducted an audit to validate compliance with Mental
16 Health Block Grant requirements and services across the division. The auditor identified the
17 significant improvement to services since their last visit, prior to 2017, and the accomplishments of
18 the programs, SAMSHA representative also remarked at the work being done with limited staff and
19 limited resources while making strides in breaking the barrier of cultural stigma.

20 Act 8688, VI Behavioral Health Act

21 After several years of collaborative work with thanks to the Office of the Governor and the former
22 Health, Hospital and Human Services Committee Chair, Senate President Novell Francis we can
23 announce the successful passing of Bill No. 34-027, now Act 8688, an amendment to restructure,
24 reclassify, and adopt the Territory's first comprehensive Virgin Islands Behavioral Health Act to
25 provide for services and interdepartmental coordination of agencies and organizations to provide a
26 structure of support to individuals throughout the VI who suffer from behavioral health challenges
27 or mental illness.

1 This act will serve to streamline and pool resources of the GVI together to best serve our
2 community. The Division of Behavioral Health has developed a work plan for the new law to
3 implement the additional services and collaborations required to achieve the new objectives.

4 We are prepared to speak at the upcoming 2023 Virgin Islands Judicial Conference “*Leading*
5 *Change Through Judicial Education*” scheduled for later this month where we will introduce and
6 answer questions surrounding the Act.

7 Staffing

8 We hired staff to fill the following positions: two (2) clinical therapists, three (3) community
9 outreach workers, two (3) chauffeurs for the behavioral health vans, one (1) substance abuse
10 outreach worker, one (1) state prevention coordinator, one (1) behavioral health services
11 coordinator, six (6) 988 crisis lifeline staff, one (1) substance abuse outreach worker, and one (1)
12 clinical therapist.

13 **Communicable Disease Division**

14 Under the theme **340GettingToZero** the Communicable Disease Division continued to promote
15 ending the HIV epidemic and reducing Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI) in the territory.

16 The goals of the 340 Getting to Zero Campaign are:

- 17 • 90 percent of people living with HIV knowing their HIV status;
- 18 • 90 percent of people who know their HIV-positive status receiving treatment; and
- 19 • 90 percent of people on treatment have suppressed viral loads.

20 Last year, the Communicable Disease Division partnered with the Public Health Lab to commence
21 STI testing in the Territory. With successful implementation, individuals have been able to receive
22 their STI test results in less than a week, allowing them to get treated quickly and reducing the
23 chances of complications due to the STI.

24 Most minorities, including sexual and gender minorities continue to face health and social
25 disparities. The Communicable Disease Division conducted an interactive LGBTQ+ cultural
26 competency training for Department of Health officials and representatives of other health and

1 support services entities. The division also hosted a round table workshop with the leadership of
2 other government agencies to including the Division of Personnel and Department of Labor, to
3 better understand their needs for improving their cultural competency with LGBTQ+ persons.

4
5 Building staff capacity and providing national exposure is a goal of the division. Most recently, the
6 division director led a delegation to the 2023 STD Engage Conference under the theme “Coming
7 Back Stronger.” The CDD Director also presented on panel with other national health leaders
8 discussing DoxyPEP. DoxyPEP has been hailed as one of the most important innovations to the
9 STI treatment in more than a decade. DoxyPEP, similar to the ‘morning after’ pill, helps prevent
10 STIs. Within hours of unprotected sex, DoxyPEP can prevent STIs.

11
12 The division debuted its “Ending the HIV Epidemic” ad featuring the St. Croix 2022-2023 Festival
13 Queen at the conference. Please allow us a moment to share this ad with you and the public.

14 [https://usvi.sharepoint.com/:v/s/CDDCoordinators/ERU5H3dcoz1Fm_nujozcQjYBS-](https://usvi.sharepoint.com/:v/s/CDDCoordinators/ERU5H3dcoz1Fm_nujozcQjYBS-EKkHzb0AsCO-2SvA-5MA?e=ePMqaC)
15 [EKkHzb0AsCO-2SvA-5MA?e=ePMqaC](https://usvi.sharepoint.com/:v/s/CDDCoordinators/ERU5H3dcoz1Fm_nujozcQjYBS-EKkHzb0AsCO-2SvA-5MA?e=ePMqaC)

16 Throughout the reporting period, the division actively engaged in fifty (50) outreach events,
17 offering STI and HIV testing. The division also launched its social media campaign “340 Getting to
18 Zero” at various events. To build awareness we encouraged individuals to take selfies in front of our
19 banner and then share it on social media using the hashtag #340gettingtozero. The increased
20 visibility of was instrumental in normalizing the acceptance of routine STI screening as a routine
21 aspect of self-care.

22 Having a robust surveillance system is key as the data is used to guide prevention and treatment
23 strategies. The division was successful with having 90% of our newly diagnosed cases for 2022
24 linked care within days of obtaining a confirmatory result.

25 In 2022, the Division identified 17 new HIV/AIDS cases, 626 Chlamydia, 44 Gonorrhea and 3
26 Syphilis cases. Preliminary 2023 data, to date, indicates that there are 104 cases of Chlamydia, 10
27 cases of Gonorrhea and 2 cases of Syphilis.

1 With everyone's support in our community, we will say 340GettingToZero as we meet the campaign
2 objectives and our Key Performance Indicators.

3

4 **The Bureau of Healthcare Quality**

5 The Department of Health's regulatory oversight services include birth and death certificates, burial
6 permits, funeral homes, tobacco control, medicinal marijuana control/regulation, food safety,
7 certificate of need, medical malpractice, clinician and allied health licensing, and professional
8 boards and related health data collection.

9 **Office of Emergency Medical Services Regulatory**

10 The Office of Emergency Medical Services or EMS, Regulatory plays a vital role in overseeing
11 EMS professionals, instructors, vehicles, and services. Our responsibilities encompass licensures,
12 inspections, and certification necessary for these entities to operate within the Territory.

13 Looking towards the future, our aim is to align our processes with those of any other state. To
14 achieve this, we are working on making various applications available through the Department of
15 Health's website. Additionally, we are diligently ensuring our compliance with mandatory reporting
16 to esteemed organizations such as the National Emergency Medical Services Information System
17 (NEMSIS), Office of Highway Safety and National Highway Traffic Safety Administration
18 (NHTSA), and Health Resources & Services Administration (HRSA), among others.

19 Pending the review of our Mobile Integrated Healthcare-Paramedicine (MIH-CP) Program and the
20 need to identify the appropriate funding source, we continue to provide care, treating 80 patients
21 weekly. Since the program's inception in 2017, following the aftermath of Hurricanes Irma and
22 Maria, we have cared for over 1,800 patients which can also mean, we prevented 1,800 admissions
23 to the hospital.

24 The primary objective of the MIH-CP program is to prevent patients from unnecessarily calling 911
25 and returning to the hospital. Oftentimes, patients seek immediate transport to the Emergency
26 Department for primary care issues, thereby straining the emergency system. The program strives to
27 address this issue by:

28 The MIH-CP Program has set specific objectives, including:

- 1 • Identifying individuals without primary care physicians and helping them find suitable
2 healthcare providers, thereby reducing unnecessary hospital visits.
- 3 • Providing education and health promotion programs that emphasize self-monitoring and
4 enhance understanding of dietary needs and the disease process.

5 Currently, our services encompass: Decubitus Ulcer (Wound Care) management, Medication
6 Reconciliation, Wellness checks, Individualized Care Plans, ensuring a Safe Environment to name
7 only a few others including cancer care.

8 **Emergency Medical Services for Children**

9 Emergency Medical Services for Children is a grant funded program that falls under the Office of
10 EMS Regulatory. The program's main goals are to provide the necessary training and equipment for
11 the care of pediatric patients for both ambulances and hospitals. Along with making sure the
12 pediatric patients get the appropriate care for their given emergencies.

13 Annually and bi-annually, the program ensures the following training is provided:

- 14 ○ Pediatric Advance Life Support
- 15 ○ Emergency Pediatric Care
- 16 ○ Pediatric Emergency Nursing courses
- 17 ○ The S. T. A. B. L. E course, which stands for Sugar, Temperature, Airway, Blood Pressure,
18 Lab work, and Emotional Support. The course entails the post-resuscitation/pre-transport
19 stabilization care for sick infants. Also, ambulances, the Emergency Department, the
20 Labor/Delivery, and NICU units of the Territory's hospitals have the equipment to treat and
21 stabilize pediatric patients in an emergency, including these.
 - 22 ▪ Braslow® Pediatric System for Ambulances
 - 23 ▪ Braslow® Pediatric Cart Systems for Hospitals
 - 24 ▪ Infusion Guides
 - 25 ▪ Assessment tools such as appropriate size blood pressure cuffs
 - 26 ▪ Intraosseous Drills and Needles appropriately sized for our protocol

1 As lead in regulation in pre-hospital medical care providers as well as first responders and the
2 gateway to the Public Health System, we will continue to be a vital resource: as we are aware of the
3 events of the past year and how life as we knew it has now changed and we are getting adjusted to a
4 new normal. The EMS community has already experienced and recognized the trend where because
5 of Infectious Disease Emergence, the delivery of pre-hospital care will require adjustment and
6 change.

7

8 **Environmental Health and Safety**

9 The Division of Environmental Health has become the Division of Environmental and Safety. In
10 addition to its vital role of safeguarding public health through the prevention and control of
11 environmental health hazards, the division has also assumed responsibilities related to security and
12 safety. The core functions of the Division of Environmental Health and Safety include:

- 13 ○ Food Safety: The division conducts inspections and enforces regulations.
- 14 ○ Vector Control: Disease-carrying pests like mosquitoes and rodents are managed and
15 controlled by the division to prevent the transmission of infectious diseases.
- 16 ○ Environmental Health Emergency Response: The division promptly responds to
17 environmental health emergencies, such as natural disasters, chemical spills, or disease
18 outbreaks.
- 19 ○ Physical Security: Managing access control, surveillance systems, and conducting regular
20 patrols to ensure the security of the premises.
- 21 ○ Emergency Management: Developing and implementing comprehensive emergency plans
22 and procedures in collaboration with our Public Health Preparedness Division to address
23 various emergencies, such as fires, natural disasters, or security threats.
- 24 ○ Risk Management: Collaborating with the risk management division to identify potential
25 risks, conduct risk assessments, investigate incidents, and implement corrective measures to
26 mitigate risks effectively.
- 27 ○ Patient and Staff Safety: Monitoring and enforcing safety protocols, including infection
28 control practices, to prevent accidents, injuries, and the spread of infectious diseases among
29 patients and staff.
- 30 ○ Training and Education: Providing comprehensive training and education to staff members
31 on safety and security protocols, emergency response, and workplace violence prevention.

- 1 ○ Investigation and Response: Conducting thorough investigations into security breaches,
2 incidents of workplace violence, or other safety concerns, and implementing necessary
3 actions to prevent future occurrences.

4

5 **Professional Licensure and Health Planning**

6 The Office of Professional Licensure and Health Planning continues the charge to maintain public
7 health and safety through license regulations for nine (9) health professional boards and the
8 administration of the Territory's Certificate of Need and Allied Health programs. The current
9 boards are Chiropractic, Dental, Medical, Optometry, Pharmacy, Physical Therapy, Podiatry,
10 Psychology, and Veterinary. Fifteen (15) different license types are currently vetted and expected to
11 expand as access, technology, and resources improve. The VI Board of Nurse Licensure is one of
12 the boards that the Department of Health has regulatory

13 **Immunization**

14 The VI Immunization Program is charged with the responsibility of ensuring uninsured and
15 underinsured populations receive vaccinations to prevent disease, disability, and death. The
16 program develops protocols which are disseminated to providers, educators, and family members,
17 and reviewed annually to ensure regulatory oversight of vaccine administration to children. The
18 Immunization Program is 100 percent federally funded and works cohesively with the Center for
19 Disease Control and Prevention to ensure vaccines in the Territory are up to date and administered
20 properly and to empower providers to increase vaccination. We are also working to change the
21 perspective of providers who do not administer certain vaccines, to address vaccine exemption and
22 hesitancy, and to utilize purpose-driven messaging to creatively communicate the importance of
23 vaccines.

24 **Vital Records and Statistics**

25 The Office of Vital Records and Statistics is mandated by the VI Code to register and preserve data
26 relative to all vital events in the Territory of the United States Virgin Islands. Vital Records and
27 Statistics is responsible for the registration, maintenance, and dissemination of the Territory's birth
28 and death records. Vital Records and Statistics works closely with healthcare facilities, public health

1 offices, funeral homes, courts, Social Security Administration, Paternity and Child Support
2 Division, and other federal/local agencies. Our main goal is to provide professional service with
3 integrity, accuracy, and security of records.

4 **The Bureau of Health Promotion and Disease Prevention**

5 One of our most productive units in terms of community outreach, the Bureau of Health Promotion
6 and Disease Prevention includes the Division of Chronic Disease; Community Health Clinics;
7 Family Planning Program; Infants and Toddlers Program; Maternal and Child Health and Children
8 with Special Health Care Needs Program; Primary Care Office; Public Health Laboratory; and
9 Women, Infants and Children Program. Program directors and administrators in this unit manage
10 over twenty-eight million dollars (\$28,000,000) in local and federal funding, employing one
11 hundred and eighteen (118) clinical, Allied Health, and administrative support professionals. Health
12 Promotion and Disease Prevention programs planned and participated in the National Public Health
13 Week and the St. Croix Agriculture Fair outreach activities, reaching over 300 persons with health
14 screenings and general health education messages.

15 **Community Health Workers**

16 With a seed grant from Cigna Foundation, the division hired the first community health worker in
17 May 2022, and later onboarded four additional community health workers. We collaborated with
18 the COVID-19 disparities grant to pilot a training curriculum as a key step towards establishing a
19 community health worker training program in the USVI. To date, the department employs five (5)
20 community health workers and one more is awaiting a NOPA (Notification of Personnel Action).
21 The goal is to expand the health care workforce using trained community health workers across the
22 public and private health sectors.

23 This week, the VI Department of Health will hold its first Community Health Workers Convening,
24 bringing community and federal partners to collaborate in the development of this program.

25 **Health Disparities Program**

26 The Health Disparities Program receives 100 percent funding from the Centers for Disease Control
27 through grant CDC-RFA-OT21-2103, known as the National Initiative to Address COVID-19 Health
28 Disparities Among Populations at High-Risk and Underserved, Including Racial and Ethnic Minority

1 Populations and Rural Communities. The Health Disparities Program provides services to community
2 members adversely affected by COVID-19 with a spotlight on Long-COVID. Leveraging the
3 expertise of our Community Health Workers, our program has successfully carried out more than
4 eighty (80) targeted outreach initiatives, distributing personal protective items to safeguard against
5 and reduce the spread of COVID-19. Furthermore, we have successfully organized the inaugural
6 Health Disparities Leadership Conference and two impactful Summits, fostering open and active
7 communication surrounding the vital subject of Health Equity within our region.

8 **Chronic Disease Program**

9 The Chronic Disease Program includes several federal grants related to health promotion and
10 disease prevention focused on chronic diseases. Grants include Diabetes and Tobacco Prevention &
11 Control, Preventive Health, and Health Services Block Grant (includes Sexual Assault), Cancer
12 Prevention and Control (Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection, Comprehensive Cancer
13 Control, and VI Central Cancer Registry), Rape Prevention, and Surveillance (Behavioral Risk
14 Factor Surveillance System Survey). These grants allow for the delivery of evidence-based
15 programs that educate persons on ways to reduce their risk of chronic disease development and
16 equip persons who have chronic diseases with tools to manage their conditions.

17 The division also utilizes funding to run multimedia campaigns that educate the community on
18 disease prevention and management. The Chronic Disease program strengthens community
19 engagement through the organization of and participation in outreach activities that target high risk,
20 priority, and underserved populations. The division also collaborates with public health clinics to
21 promote the delivery of clinical preventive services that reduce tobacco use and improve diabetes
22 management.

23 The Cancer Registry and the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System programs collect and
24 report on chronic diseases and their risk factors such as alcohol and tobacco use, nutrition, physical
25 activity, cancer cardiovascular disease, and weight status, which have a substantial impact on an
26 individual's health. Data is used to inform public health program development and implementation
27 in the Territory. The Chronic Disease Divisions also hosts the Community-based Chronic Disease
28 Advisory Meeting.

1 **Community Health Clinics**

2 The community health clinics serve as a critical access to care for many, offering primary care
3 services by board-certified providers, adult vaccinations, specialty care such as cardiology and eye
4 clinic and care for persons with chronic conditions.

5 **Family Planning**

6 The Family Planning Division focuses on providing comprehensive reproductive healthcare
7 services and information to individuals and families. Their primary goal is to assist individuals in
8 making informed decisions about their reproductive health, plan pregnancies, and ensure access to
9 contraceptive methods. The Family Planning program has been continuously funded through the
10 Title X grant from the Office of Population Affairs for over fifty (50) years. Services include breast
11 and cervical cancer screening, reproductive health services and patient navigation services towards
12 ensuring referral to services when indicated by screening test results.

13 **Infants and Toddlers**

14 The Virgin Island Infants and Toddlers Program is a family-centered, multi-disciplinary system of
15 early intervention services for infants and toddlers from birth through two years of age who have
16 disabilities or developmental delays. The program is fully funded by Part C of the Individuals with
17 Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The Infant and Toddler Program is charged with implementing
18 a comprehensive system of supports and services for infants and toddlers with developmental delays
19 and their families including; service coordination, developmental therapy, speech/language
20 pathology, physical and occupational therapy, vision screenings and audiology. All services are
21 performed in the child's natural environment to the extent possible.

22 **Maternal Child Health Division**

23 The Maternal and Child Health and Children with Special Health Care Needs Program is fully
24 federally funded and supports the Virgin Islands Department of Health's mission to enhance the
25 health of mothers, infants, children, and adolescents, including those with special health care needs.

26 The program's overarching vision is to ensure that all children and families have the right to receive
27 high-quality, comprehensive health care. We provide our clients with accessible, family-centered

1 health services which promote the well-being of children and families, in an environment that is
2 welcoming, respectful, courteous, and values patient confidentiality. This program serves more than
3 4,500 clients territory-wide, annually.

4 The Maternal and Child Health division offers various programs and services, including Early
5 Hearing Detection, Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program, Project
6 LAUNCH (geared toward identifying and treatment of behavioral health challenges), Virgin Islands
7 Child Psychiatry Access Program, pediatric care, childhood immunization, and outreach services.
8 The program collaborates internally and externally with partners such as the VI departments of
9 Education, Human Services, Sports, Parks and Recreation, and community-based organizations.
10 These collaborative efforts are a fundamental aspect of the program's work.

11 **Primary Care Office**

12 The U.S. Virgin Islands Primary Care Office increases access to quality healthcare through
13 assessment, collaboration, and workforce development. It is 100 percent funded, one hundred fifty
14 thousand, four hundred sixty-four dollars (\$150,464.00), through a cooperative agreement with the
15 Health Resources and Services Administration. The three broad areas of activity covered by the
16 Primary Care Office are territory-wide primary care needs assessment; shortage designation
17 coordination; and technical assistance and collaboration with other health care agencies.

18 **Women Infants and Children**

19 The Virgin Islands Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children
20 (WIC) is a 100 percent federally funded nutrition program of the Food and Nutrition Service of the
21 U.S. Department of Agriculture. The WIC Program provides supplemental foods and nutrition
22 education at no cost and referrals to other health care and social services programs and agencies to
23 eligible participants. WIC participants are low-income pregnant, breastfeeding, and non-
24 breastfeeding postpartum women, infants, and children up to age five (5). The USVI WIC program
25 has been recognized nationally as achieving the highest breast-feeding rates among WIC programs
26 across the nation. WIC serves approximately 2,600 customers per month, territory-wide.

1 **Territorial Public Health Laboratory**

2 The Territorial Public Health Laboratory continues to provide efficient testing for diseases of public
3 health importance. The laboratory recently completed a federal inspection and successfully renewed
4 the certificate for high complexity testing. The average time from receiving a specimen to providing
5 test results is under 24 hours and a significant improvement for tests that may have had to be sent
6 off island. While the laboratory continues to support COVID-19 efforts by providing confirmatory
7 testing and supplies to providers in the Territory it also continues to expand testing to other
8 important respiratory diseases, sexually transmitted diseases, gastrointestinal diseases, mosquito-
9 borne diseases, and other infections. Relocation efforts are in high gear to accommodate the
10 demolition and reconstruction of the Charles Harwood Complex, both FEMA and CZM (Coastal
11 Zone Management) approvals have been obtained. During this time, a mobile laboratory will be
12 used for eight to twelve (8-12) weeks to prevent any interruption of services.

13 **Bureau of Epidemiology**

14 **Epidemiology Division**

15 The Epidemiology Division (EPI) collects surveillance data to identify, prevent, and respond to
16 current, emerging, and unknown public health threats. As a bureau within the VI Department of
17 Health, Epidemiology has helped partners detect and respond to various public health issues,
18 including dengue, Chikungunya, Zika, Norovirus, and bacterial special pathogens surveillance.
19 Since the increased surveillance conducted after hurricanes Irma and Maria, the Epi team found
20 cases of Leptospirosis and Melioidosis in the Territory. Over the past year Epidemiology has been
21 conducting enhanced surveillance for Leptospirosis and the freedom from rabies project.

22 Infectious Diseases Surveillance builds capacity in five key areas: 1) investigation response and
23 reporting; 2) surveillance to drive public health action; 3) laboratory services; 4) health information
24 systems, and 5) coordination and collaboration. Key public health disease priorities include Zika
25 and arboviruses, 18 respiratory viruses including COVID-19 and influenza, vaccine-preventable
26 diseases, and all reportable diseases.

27 In 2023, our COVID-19 numbers have been low, with our highest new cases per week being in
28 January of this year at 222 new cases in a single week. Compared to January 2022, when our new

1 cases per week exceeded 2,000, we are doing well. The week of May 30th there were 36 new
2 COVID-19 cases.

3 **Health Information Technology Division**

4 The Health Information Technology (HIT) Division oversees, develops, and maintains the
5 department's technology infrastructure. Its primary focus is to meet the agency's increasing
6 demands for efficient and secure communication, collaboration, and connection with both public
7 and private health resources. The DOH HIT division works in close partnership with the Bureau of
8 Information Technology (BIT) GVI technology strategic framework to enhance, support, and
9 implement current and advanced technological systems and integrated solutions for the Department
10 of Health.

11 The HIT Division made notable achievements including:

- 12 ○ Upgrading the department's Clinical and Revenue Generating System to meet the latest
13 2022 Office of National Coordinator and Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services
14 certification standards. This upgrade enables support for telehealth, public patient care,
15 secure messaging, and secure access.
- 16 ○ Integrating with Immunization Registry: The HIT division successfully integrated the
17 agency's clinical system with the Immunization Registry, allowing for secure bidirectional
18 transmission of electronic data between the systems, ensuring accurate and synchronized
19 immunization records.
- 20 ○ Collaborating with BIT Territorial GVI Technological Strategic Steering Workgroup to
21 implement centralized services and solutions for all GVI agencies. The HIT division has
22 achieved considerable progress by fully integrating into GVI Microsoft services and
23 continuing the onboarding of systems into the GVI One framework.
- 24 ○ Upgraded End User Computer System: Approximately 80 percent of the end-user computer
25 system has been upgraded to provide enhanced resource support, aligning with the agency's
26 goals and objectives.

27 These accomplishments demonstrate the HIT division's dedication to advancing technology within
28 the VI Department of Health, enabling efficient data management, improved patient care, and
29 streamlined operations.

1 **Facilities Management**

2 The Facilities Management Division provides housekeeping and facilities maintenance for twenty-
3 three (23) GVI -owned buildings and other leased locations. The Security section provides security
4 and protection for visitors and employees at the department’s operational locations.

5 **Project Management & Capital Projects**

6 The Project Management Office oversees and coordinates the execution of capital projects,
7 including disaster recovery projects within the Department of Health’s infrastructure. This work
8 involves collaboration with Disaster Recovery funding and management agencies such as the
9 FEMA, VITEMA, Community Development Block Grant- Disaster Recovery (CDBG-DR), the
10 Office of Disaster Recovery (ODR) and others subject matter experts. The department has formally
11 established the Project Management & Capital Projects Division, whose Key Performance
12 Indicators have been officially approved through the Office of Management and Budgets.

13 **Conclusion**

14 I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the dedicated staff at Virgin Islands Department of
15 Health for their unwavering support in spearheading public health initiatives within our community.
16 I would like to recognize our 2023 Employees of the Year for their exceptional work in supporting
17 our goals and objectives. Ms. Talesa Barnes in the St. Croix District, who serves of our Laboratory
18 Supervisor, and Ms. Jennifer Williams in the St. Thomas-St. John District, who serves as nutrition
19 aide on St. John. Thank you for all you do. You are truly appreciated.

20 In closing, Senator Fonseca, the Department of Health remains steadfast in fulfilling our mission
21 *"To Reduce Health Risks, Increase Access to Quality Healthcare and Enforce Health Standards"* in a culturally
22 competent, equitable manner.

23 We are fully devoted to sustaining our collaborative endeavors with the members of the 35th
24 Legislature, and we deeply appreciate the support you provide in our ongoing mission to enhance
25 healthcare within our community. My team and I are available to address any questions you may
26 have. Again, I thank you.