



**35TH LEGISLATURE OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS
COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, HOSPITALS AND HUMAN SERVICES**

The Honorable Senator Ray Fonseca.
Chair of Committee

Testimony Presented By

The Honorable Justa Encarnacion, RN, BSN, MBA/HCM
Commissioner of Health

On

Pros and Cons of granting VIDCOE's request for public funding and other support.

1 Good day, Honorable Senator Ray Fonseca, Chairperson of the Committee on Health, Hospitals
2 and Human Services; Honorable Senator Kenneth L. Gittens, Vice Chair; Committee members,
3 and all non-committee members, and the viewing and listening audience. I am Justa “Tita”
4 Encarnacion, Commissioner for the Virgin Islands Department of Health, and present with me
5 today are Assistant Commissioners Dr. Nicole Craigwell-Syms and Reuben Molloy and Chief
6 Medical Officer Tai Hunte Caesar, and Deputy Commissioner Janis Valmond to present
7 pros and cons (if any), of granting VIDCOE’s request for public funding and other support.

8 According to the 2023 Behavioral Risk Survey, the prevalence of diabetes in the USVI adult
9 population in 2023 was 16.6%, up from 15.3% in 2022. As per the 2020 Census, the population
10 aged 18 and older was 70,030. This would suggest approximately 11,625 adults aged 18+ have
11 been told by a doctor they had diabetes in 2023. The public health approach to addressing type 2
12 diabetes at the population level places significant attention and resources on prevention. Access to
13 care and chronic disease burden are two of the six priority areas in *Healthy Virgin Islands 2030*,
14 the territory’s community health improvement plan. Healthy Virgin Islands 2030 can be accessed
15 at [Reports and Plans - VI Department of Health](#). Public health agencies rely on a wide network of
16 stakeholders working together as a comprehensive healthcare system to reduce the impact of
17 chronic disease, resulting in improved health outcomes and reduced healthcare costs. The
18 Department of Health currently receives grant funding from the Centers for Disease Control and
19 Prevention to conduct health promotion and prevention initiatives. Activities include multi-media
20 campaigns to raise awareness and implementing evidence-based interventions to improve overall
21 health outcomes related to chronic diseases, including diabetes. Funded solely by General fund
22 appropriations, the VI DOH community health clinics provide primary care services, regardless of
23 the client’s ability to pay, and are located on all three islands. These clinics served 1,693 clients in
24 2023, of whom 123, or 7%, were diagnosed with diabetes.

25 Public-private partnerships have been a cornerstone of the work of the department. Through
26 mutually beneficial collaborations, the Department of Health can maximize reach and overall
27 impact while leveraging limited resources to achieve strategic and population health goals. To date,
28 the Chronic Disease program and the Community Health Clinics have successfully partnered with
29 VIDCOE to conduct outreach events in both districts. This type of collaboration aligns with the

1 Department of Health Central Challenge as stated in our *Strategic Plan 2020-2025*, to make health
2 the Virgin Islands shared value, and operationalized through our strategic priority to take health to
3 where people live, work, learn, play, and pray.

4 The cost benefits of preventive health care are well documented in the literature. For many, cost
5 and access to care are significant barriers to completing routine care. The Department of Health,
6 as the public health authority for the territory, operates with annual appropriations and a portfolio
7 of federal grants. Each year, we must defend our budget and make a strong case for adequate
8 funding to continue the incredible work entrusted to us by our community and Governor Bryan's
9 *Healthy Horizons Initiative*. Therefore, we understand and appreciate the request by VIDCOE to
10 expand access to prevention and early detection services as a key partner in the comprehensive
11 healthcare system.

12 The Department is committed to reducing health risks, increasing access to quality equitable
13 healthcare, and enforcing health standards. Nonprofits are dependent upon philanthropic and
14 public sector funding; the government is on the other hand dependent on the nonprofit sector to
15 provide services to its constituents very much as seen in the VI Department of Health and the VI
16 Diabetes Center of Excellence collaborative.

17 Our thanks to Governor Bryan and Lt. Governor Tregenza A. Roach for continuing to prioritize
18 public health and the wellness of all Virgin Islanders.

19 Again, we thank this body for its commitment to public health and for the opportunity to
20 acknowledge our support for the VIDCOE at today's hearing. The Department continues
21 collaborative efforts with the 35th Legislature members. We stand ready to respond to any
22 questions you may have.