



# Health Services and Institutions

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## Overview

Since Hurricanes Irma and Maria devastated the territory in September 2017, U.S. Virgin Islanders have overcome many challenges. Now, in this time of recovery, efforts are not just focused on restoring capacity, but about realizing potential. In 2020, Governor Albert A. Bryan Jr. introduced his Healthier Horizons Initiative – a sweeping reform of healthcare in the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI), built on a foundation of three tenets: increasing access to care, modernizing delivery of health services to residents, and hardening healthcare infrastructure.<sup>1</sup> The Healthier Horizons Initiative was designed to culminate with three strategic products developed by the USVI Department of Health (USVI DOH) with distinct goals aligned around a common vision of health improvement. Alone, each plan provides a brief snapshot of the health of residents over a specific period of time, the demonstrated needs as identified by residents and their behavior, and the roadmap toward individual health and overall healthcare improvement:

- The Community Health Assessment (May 2020) provides a comprehensive review of the health of the community. It identifies health disparities among different types of people and across a range of health issues.
- The USVI DOH Strategic Plan 2020- 2025 (September 2020) guides a five-year process to improve the service delivery and outcomes of the USVI DOH.
- The Healthy Virgin Islands 2030 Community Health Improvement Plan (April 2022) includes health priorities and strategies the USVI will adopt and implement designed to reduce health inequities and improve health outcomes for USVI residents.

The USVI DOH functions as both the state regulatory agency and the territorial public health agency for the USVI. As set forth by the Virgin Islands Code, Titles 3 and 19, the USVI DOH has direct responsibility for conducting programs of preventive medicine, including special programs in Maternal and Child Health, Family Planning, Environmental Sanitation, Mental Health, and Drug and Substance Abuse Prevention. USVI DOH is also responsible for health promotion and protection, regulation of health care providers and facilities, and policy development and planning, as well as maintaining the vital statistics for the population. USVI DOH provides Emergency Medical Services, issues birth and death certificates, performs environmental health services, and conducts health research and surveys. The Department is also responsible for regulating and licensing health care providers and facilities and assumes primary responsibility for the health of the community in the event of a disaster.<sup>2</sup>

There are 48 health care facilities in the USVI. Two main hospitals serve the needs of Virgin Islanders: the Juan F. Luis Medical Center in St. Croix and the Schneider Regional Medical Center in St. Thomas. The Myrah Keating Community Health Center on the island of St. John is affiliated with the Schneider Regional Medical Center. The USVI DOH provides services from four locations within the territory: The Community Health Clinic at the Schneider Regional Medical Center and the Dr. John S. Moorehead Municipal Hospital Complex in St. Thomas; The Morris F. DeCastro Clinic in St. John; and the Charles Harwood Complex-Modular Buildings in St. Croix. There are two federally-qualified health centers (FQHC) in the U.S. Virgin Islands. Twelve health care facilities are National Health Service Corps (NHSC) certified by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA). NHSC certification allows those

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<sup>1</sup> USVI DOH Strategic Plan 2020-2025 (September 2020) <https://doh.vi.gov/usvi-doh-strategic-plan-2020-2025>.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Virgin Islands Department of Health, 2022, <https://doh.vi.gov/>.

facilities to apply for federal funding to support health care worker training and enables primary care workers to receive subsidies for school loans.<sup>3</sup>

Complementing the Governor’s Healthier Horizons Initiative is the advancement of healthcare legislation aimed at facilitating necessary healthcare reform. The majority of this legislation emphasizes equity at its core regarding access, treatment, and care. One piece of legislation (Bill No. 32-0247) seeks to remove stigmas associated with terms such as ‘mental health’ to an emphasis on ‘behavioral health’ while another (Behavioral Health and Development Disability Act) establishes the first Behavioral Health, Mental Health, Developmental Disability, Alcohol or Substance Abuse Facility to serve the public’s need for services and treatment in the Virgin Islands.

Since the start of the Governor’s Healthier Horizons Initiative, a number of health-related initiatives have been implemented. These initiatives are the result of collaborative efforts between partner community organizations (USVI Walkability Institute and Virgin Islands Trail Alliance) and various USVI departments (Department of Sports, Parks, and Recreation). Of note is the nexus between recovery from the 2017 hurricanes and healthy lifestyles and community design throughout these initiatives. The USVI has demonstrated its commitment to undertaking a comprehensive approach to not just rebuild, but to rebuild stronger and more resilient at their full potential.

## U.S. Virgin Islands Department of Health

### Programs<sup>4</sup>

The USVI DOH operates several public health programs to meet the health needs of Virgin Islanders. Programs include:

#### *Behavioral Health, Alcoholism, and Drug Dependency Services*

This program provides help to individuals with substance use disorders and behavioral health, individuals and families in crisis, and individuals coping with stress after a disaster or traumatic event.

#### *Communicable Diseases*

This division provides information and services to prevent, test for, and treat infectious diseases such as human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), and tuberculosis (TB). All available clinical services are either free or low cost to the community.

#### *Immunizations*

This program’s vision is to reduce the risk of vaccine preventable disease by increasing the number of persons up to date with appropriate vaccinations, decreasing the number of vaccine exemption waivers, and making it law that all vaccinations administered within the territory be entered into the Virgin Islands Immunization Registry System (VIIRS), a web-based registry system.

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<sup>3</sup> USVI Community Health Assessment 2020, <https://doh.vi.gov/community-health-assessment-report>.

<sup>4</sup> USVI DOH Strategic Plan 2020-2025 (September 2020) <https://doh.vi.gov/usvi-doh-strategic-plan-2020-2025>

### *Vital Records and Statistics (VRS)*

This office is responsible for the registration, maintenance, dissemination, and local registry of the Territory's birth and death records. VRS also serves as the custodian for data related to marriages, divorces, and health-related chronic diseases.

### *Women, Infants and Children (WIC)*

WIC is the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children, funded by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), and administered through the Virgin Islands Department of Health. It promotes health for mothers and children through good nutrition, breastfeeding promotion and support, supplemental foods, and access to other health and social services.

### *Infant and Toddlers Program (ITP)*

ITP is a territory wide system of early intervention services for infants and toddlers from birth through two years of age who have disabilities or developmental delays. ITP is charged with implementing a territory-wide, comprehensive system of supports and services for infants and toddlers with developmental delays and their families. All services are performed in the child's natural environment to the extent possible.

### *Family Planning*

The Family Planning Clinics offer sexual and reproductive health services for women, men, and adolescents. The program offers a spectrum of sexual and reproductive health services, including birth control methods, testing and treatment for sexually transmitted infections, preconception care, pregnancy testing, breast and cervical cancer screening, and postpartum care. The program also offers community outreach and education programs.

### *Maternal and Child Health/Children with Special Health Care Needs (MCH & CSHCN)*

The Maternal and Child Health Block Grant is authorized by Title V of the Social Security Act. The Block Grant Funds assist the USVI in managing program activities directed at improving and maintaining the health status of women, infants, and children, including children with special health care needs and adolescents.

### *Chronic Disease and Prevention*

This division aims to provide information and resources to make it easier for people to make healthy choices. Chronic diseases are generally conditions that last 1 year or more and require ongoing medical attention or limit activities of daily living or both. Most chronic diseases can be prevented by eating well, being physically active, avoiding tobacco and excessive drinking, and getting regular health screenings.

### *Environmental Health (DEH)*

DEH protects human health by preventing harmful environmental conditions through a combination of surveillance, education, enforcement, and assessment services. The program works to prevent, minimize, and eliminate exposure to biological, chemical, and physical hazards. Regulatory services include permitting and inspecting businesses and public facilities.

The program's aim is to increase environmental awareness by educating the public, implementing new legislation, and enforcing the current USVI and Federal Public Health Laws.

#### *Office of Professional Licensure and Health Planning*

This program aims to license, certify, and discipline health care professionals, and to identify professional standards to ensure the highest quality health care for, and protection of, the public. Also, to ensure the highest quality care for the people of the USVI by upholding standards of practice for Health Professionals.

#### *Public Health Preparedness (PHP)*

The purpose of PHP is to improve public health preparedness capacity by ensuring coordination among local, territorial, state, and federal agencies, including health care partners before, during, and after public health events, including preparedness planning and hazard mitigation, emergency response, and disaster recovery.

#### *Emergency Medical Services (VIEMS)*

The USVI DOH provides emergency care and transport of the sick and injured VIEMS, which is tasked with many other responsibilities, including public safety, highway safety, rescue response, health & environmental monitoring, community outreach, and EMS for children. VIEMS provides services to the three major islands plus surrounding cays and waterways via ground and sea transport vehicles.

#### *Epidemiology & Disease Reporting*

This division's goal is to protect and improve health throughout the USVI through science, policy, partnership, and evidence-based public health action.

#### *Community Health Services (CHS)*

CHS provides comprehensive, preventative, accessible, and affordable health services to the people of the USVI in an effort to assist in maintaining optimal health and to prevent illness and diseases.

#### *Primary Care*

The goal of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Primary Care Office Cooperative Agreement Program is to assure the availability of quality health care to low income, uninsured, isolated, vulnerable, and special needs populations and to meet these populations' unique health care needs. The Virgin Islands Primary Care Office accomplishes this through the following:

- Measuring access to healthcare providers (primary care, mental health and dental) and assessing where people are underserved.
- Identifying communities with the greatest unmet health care needs, disparities, and health workforce shortages; identifying the key barriers to access to health care for these communities; and working toward solutions.
- Supporting and enhancing the primary care workforce in the USVI through the Bureau of Health Workforce recruitment and retention programs.

- Providing technical assistance to primary care providers, behavioral health providers, dentists, and healthcare entities with the goal of expanding access to care.

### *Vector Control Program (VCP)*

The VCP is focused on monitoring the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito that can spread dengue, Zika, and chikungunya and learning the best ways to control it. Since early 2017, the VCP has been doing routine mosquito surveillance to better understand mosquitoes in the USVI. This surveillance helps program officials make the best decisions in trying to control this mosquito to prevent disease outbreaks and mitigate natural disasters.

### Facilities and Access

Following hurricanes Irma and Maria, two Category 5 storms that damaged USVI DOH facilities back in September 2017, healthcare facilities are now advancing toward recovery with assistance from FEMA, which is helping the territory rebuild medical facilities and restore critical services. FEMA has obligated funds for healthcare facility reconstruction projects across the territory. On St. Croix, \$251 million has been obligated toward replacement of all seven buildings that comprise the Charles Harwood Medical Center Complex. Also on St. Croix, FEMA has obligated \$111.4 million for a 101-bed temporary structure at the Governor Juan F. Luis Hospital. On St. Thomas, FEMA has obligated \$45 million toward facility replacement at the Charlotte Kimelman Cancer Institute. And on St. John, FEMA obligated \$695,000 toward the replacement of the Myrah Keating Smith Community Health Center.

In terms of access, a review of the USVI Transit Routes<sup>5</sup> confirms that the majority of facilities are serviced by at least some level of public transportation. The major hospitals and health centers are all on bus routes, as are all but one smaller health facility on St. Croix and all but two on St. Thomas. However, of the six healthcare facilities on St. John, three are not located on a bus route. Private vehicles remain the most convenient way to access health care facilities throughout the territory.

### Healthcare Plans, Studies, and Reports

There have been many healthcare related plans, studies, and reports in recent years. Below is a summary of just a few of the most notable ones.

#### Community Health Assessment Report<sup>6</sup>

This plan is the first health assessment developed by the USVI DOH in over a decade. It is a starting place for creating change—change that will enable all Virgin Islanders to pursue their own health regardless of background or socioeconomic circumstance. The assessment presents data on several health topics ranging from vital statistics to the social determinants of health. Notable statistics that impact public health (taken directly from the Report) include:

- **Population Change.** The USVI population increased between 1980 – 2000, peaking at 108,642, before declining to an estimated 106,631 in 2019. The percent of residents aged 65 and older increased by 37.6% while residents under 20 decreased by 31.6% between 2005 – 2015. *Note*

<sup>5</sup> VITRAN Routes <https://www.vitrانvi.com/ride/routes>.

<sup>6</sup> Community Health Assessment Report <https://doh.vi.gov/community-health-assessment-report>.



*that the 2020 US Census showed a much lower total population of 86,146, though there is debate as to whether this was an undercount.*

- **Socio-demographics.** One in five (16.0%) residents identify as Hispanic, and three in four Hispanics (76.4%) report they are of Black race. The number of Black residents decreased from 90,758 in 2005 to 80,559 in 2015, an 11.2% decrease. Unemployment almost doubled from 5.8% in 2008 to 9.9% in 2018 and varied by island.
- **Public Health & Health Care Systems.** Most residents (81.5%) have a source of health insurance, whether public or private, and some (16.4%) delay medical care due to lack of insurance. The USVI has a noted shortage of health care professionals.
- **Births & Reproductive Health.** USVI birth rates are decreasing in every age group, and teen births dropped by 48.8% in the USVI from 2006 to 2016. Preterm births are trending downward from 15.2% in 2006 to 10.2% in 2016.
- **Child & Adolescent Health.** Children in the USVI have the lowest rate of measles, mumps, and rubella vaccination in the United States, at 70.5%. The percent of high school students who dropped out of school increased from 5.9% in the 2007-2008 school year to 9.2% in the 2017-2018 school year.
- **Health Status & Chronic Disease.** Most USVI residents report being in good or better health (79.4%), and a majority (75.7%) engage in health promoting behaviors such as physical activity. Not all adults receive recommended cancer preventive screening.
- **Trauma, Violence & Mental Health.** The rate of death by suicide among adult USVI men has increased by 351.3% over 2005. More than half (59%) of all teen deaths and two-thirds (67%) of male teen deaths are caused by firearms.
- **Infectious Diseases: Zika Disease.** There was an epidemic of Zika virus beginning in early 2016 that resulted in 2,017 confirmed Zika fever cases, the majority occurring on St. Thomas.
- **Infectious Diseases: HIV/AIDS & Sexually Transmitted Diseases.** The rate of HIV infection diagnosis decreased by 80.4% from a high of 42.8 per 100,000 people in 2010 to a low of 8.4 per 100,000 people in 2018. The incidence of chlamydia cases in the USVI decreased by 43.7% from a high of 757.2 per 100,000 people in 2011 to 430.7 per 100,000 people in 2017.
- **Mortality.** The four leading causes of death in the USVI in 2016 were heart disease, cancer, homicide, and unintentional injuries. In 2017, the top cause of premature death in the USVI was homicide, with 2,341.3 years of potential life lost before the age of 75 per 100,000 residents.

### [US Virgin Islands Physician and Dentist Workforce Profile 2020<sup>7</sup>](#)

This report analyzes the results of a survey of physicians and dentists conducted as part of the 2020 licensure gaining and renewal process. The survey includes questions on providers' demographic and practice characteristics. Only physicians and dentists actively practicing in the USVI are included in the analysis.

#### [Key Findings from Physicians Actively Practicing in USVI](#)

- Sixty percent of physicians in USVI are male. While the majority of primary care physicians identify as female (60%), only 30% of specialty care physicians identify as female.

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<sup>7</sup> Moore D, Choi Y, Armstrong D. United States Virgin Islands Physician and Dentist Workforce Profile, 2020. Rensselaer, NY: Health Workforce Technical Assistance Center, Center for Health Workforce Studies, School of Public Health, SUNY Albany; March 2022.



- The majority of physicians in USVI are more than 50 years old (70%).
- The largest proportion of physicians practicing in USVI are Black/African American (40%), followed by White Non-Hispanic (36%).
- Nearly half of all physicians practicing in the USVI report a principal practice location in the St. John/St Thomas region (47%). Just less than one-third of physicians report a principal practice location in St. Croix (31%), and less than one-fourth of physicians report a principal practice location outside of USVI (22%).
- The overwhelming majority of primary care (93%) and specialty care physicians (89%) report accepting new patients.
- Eighty percent of USVI physicians report that the average wait time for new patients was less than a week.
- When asked about their plans for the next 3 to 5 years, 92% of physicians plan to either maintain their practices as is or expand. No physicians report plans to retire.

#### Key Findings from Dentists Actively Practicing in USVI

- The majority of dentists in the USVI are male (72%), including 93% of all specialty dentists.
- Two-thirds of dentists in USVI are more than 50 years of age and almost one-third of them are older than age 60.
- Forty-five percent of dentists in USVI are White Non-Hispanic, followed by Black/African American (32%) and Hispanic (12%).
- Fifty percent of dentists in the USVI report a principal practice location in St. John/St. Thomas and 45% report a principal practice location in St. Croix. However, 60% of general dentists work in St. John/St. Thomas and more than 60% of specialty dentists practice in St. Croix.
- Almost all dentists in the USVI (97%) report accepting new patients.
- Nearly half of specialty dentists (46%) report wait times for new patients 7 days or longer, compared to less than one-third of general dentists (29%).
- When asked about their plans for the next 3 to 5 years, 74% of dentists plan to maintain their practices as is and 17% plan to expand. No dentists report plans to retire.

#### USVI DOH Strategic Plan 2020 - 2025<sup>8</sup>

This plan defines the USVI DOH's priorities, direction, and role over the next several years.

- Five strategic priorities include:
  - Create a nimble, fiscally viable, quality-driven organization.
  - Invest in staff development and engagement.
  - Invest in healthy babies and families.
  - Take health to where people live, work, learn, play, and pray.
  - Lead public health collaboration in the community.
- The USVI DOH also identified four major cross-cutting areas of work and priorities to be achieved implementing the five strategic priority areas:
  - Address the social determinants of health.
  - Create a culture of health and resilience throughout the USVI.
  - Use data-driven decision making.

<sup>8</sup> USVI DOH Strategic Plan 2020-2025 (September 2020) <https://doh.vi.gov/usvi-doh-strategic-plan-2020-2025>.

- Ensure robust public health preparedness and response.

## Health Initiatives

### US Virgin Islands Walkability Institute’s Achieving Walkability in the U.S. Virgin Islands: Benefits, Guiding Principles & Healthy Community Designs (USVI Walkability Institute)<sup>9</sup>

The USVI Walkability Institute began as a Call to Action from the 2016 Availability of Street-level Supports for Walking-U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI EPI-Aid study) and the 2017 USVI Walkability Institute workshop that was a collaborative effort of the USVI DOH and the Taskforce for Global Health. The USVI Walkability Institute is pursuing hurricane recovery efforts coupled with health initiatives through their work. As part of their mission of promoting healthy community design and walkability in the USVI, hurricane recovery efforts include the application of best practices in healthy community design to support physically active lifestyles and well-being throughout the territory. As a result of the devastation caused by the hurricanes in 2017 and following a two-day workshop on St. Croix, the Walkability Institute and its partners created the *US Virgin Islands Walkability Institute’s Achieving Walkability in the U.S. Virgin Islands: Benefits, Guiding Principles & Healthy Community Designs*.

### Walkability Map Survey: New Insights to New Paths for Improving Walking, Biking, and Transit on St. Croix (Virgin Islands Trail Alliance)<sup>10</sup>

Complementing the work accomplished by the USVI Walkability Institute, the Virgin Islands Trail Alliance (VITAL) has been working with community partners (Walkability Team, St. Croix Department of Public Works, the Urban and Community Forestry Program, Cruzan Pathways Inc. and others) to improve walkability and connectivity on St. Croix. VITAL’s end goal is to identify, plan, develop, build, and manage a system of interconnecting multi-use pathways, green spaces, walking paths, and biking trails across the island of St. Croix.

### Healthier Horizons Initiative, June 2022 (Governor’s Office)<sup>11</sup>

Under the “Healthier Horizons” umbrella, there are 11 primary elements (some of which have already been implemented) designed to upgrade and modernize healthcare in the Territory, making it easier and more efficient for residents to receive health services:

- Behavioral Health & Developmental Disabilities (BHD) Act
- Health Information Exchange
- Telehealth
- Medical Compacts
- USVI Fire Service and EMS Merger
- EMS Regulation
- Healthy Housing Initiative
- Associated Health Plans
- Hospital & Healthcare Facilities Improvements

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<sup>9</sup> Work in Progress: Achieving Walkability in the U.S. Virgin Islands. USVI Walkability Institute. September 2018. [https://www.usviwalkabilityinstitute.com/files/ugd/ee6e3d\\_07078a7cd73842ea9d84883dbf6c98b4.pdf](https://www.usviwalkabilityinstitute.com/files/ugd/ee6e3d_07078a7cd73842ea9d84883dbf6c98b4.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Walkability Map Survey. VI Trail Alliance. 2019. <https://vitrails.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Walkability-Report.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Healthier Horizons <https://www.vi.gov/healthier-horizons/>.

- Territorial Health Plan
- Medical Cannabis

### Our Best Life Health and Wellness Initiative (USVI Department of Sports, Parks and Recreation, DSPR)

Committed to improving the physical fitness of the community and the health of USVI residents by getting them up and out, the DSPR also has launched a health and wellness campaign with programs accessible to individuals of all ages and abilities. The 'Our Best Life' Health and Wellness initiative, part of the Healthier Horizons initiative, launched with the goal of improving the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of all USVI residents through a series of events, activities, and services. Current programs include:

- Walk Out Wednesdays (walking fitness challenge to promote a healthier and more active lifestyle)
- Work Out Tuesdays and Thursdays (free fitness and aerobics classes targeted at seniors)

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