34th LEGISLATURE OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE

DONNA FRETT-GREGORY
Committee Chair

THE VIRGIN ISLANDS DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

And

VIRGIN ISLANDS TERRITORIAL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AGENCY

TESTIMONY

EXTENSION OF THE STATE OF EMERGENCY
Good day, Honorable Donna A. Frett-Gregory, Senate President, Honorable Novelle E. Francis, Vice-President, Members of the 34th Legislature of the Virgin Islands of the United States, and the listening and viewing audience. I am Justa E. Encarnacion, Commissioner of the Virgin Islands Department of Health (VIDOH). I am also here today as the Incident Commander and member of the Unified Command Group (UCG) as designated by Governor Albert Bryan, Jr. in accordance with his Executive Order dated March 13, 2020. Title 3, Section 418(5) & (6) and Title 23, Section 1033(b) of the Virgin Islands Code, which authorizes the Incident Commander to take all actions necessary to protect the public’s health, and pursuant to Title 19, Chapters 15-20 of the Virgin Islands Code, the Incident Commander holds the right to exercise authority over the regulation of all health care facilities, nursing homes, shelters or other congregate housing facilities, and schools in the Territory. The Unified Command Group is comprised of our Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Acting Federal Coordinating Officer, John Covell, the Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency’s (VITEMA) Director, Daryl Jaschen and the Virgin Islands National Guard’s Adjutant General, Kodjo Knox-Limbacker. Joining me today are Director Daryl Jaschen, Dr. Nicole Craigwell-Syms, Assistant Commissioner other members of the VIDOH’s team. I thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on Governor Albert Bryan Jr.’s request for approval of the extension of the State of Emergency Declaration due to COVID-19 from March 8, 2021 to May 7, 2021.

It is critical for the USVI to maintain an active State of Emergency status. It is essential that the Government of the Virgin Islands (GVI) deploy accompanying emergency authorities and maintain access to federal benefits/assistance that arise from the emergency status. I support the
requested sixty (60) day designation, knowing that the State of Emergency will need to be extended further as the pandemic will not be over shortly.

Currently, world-wide over 115 million people have tested positive for SARS Cov2, the virus that causes the disease COVID-19. The United States has over 28 million cases reported. To date, we have tested 48,824 persons under investigation, of which 46,007 have tested negative, and 2704 have tested positive. We have experienced 25 deaths and continue to pray for the families that have lost their loved ones, experienced long episodes of hospitalization and suffered financially because of COVID-19. Our positivity level is currently 5.3% and continues to fluctuate as the level of transmission and the tests ran weekly fluctuates. We currently have 132 active cases territory-wide.

The Department’s Emergency Operations Center (EOC) was activated virtually on January 20, 2020 and remains active with daily situational briefings and work groups led by the EOC’s team leads (i.e., Operations which includes Healthcare, Mitigation, Surveillance, Planning, Logistics and Emergency Services Functions). We maintain direct contact with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) for guidance on mitigation and vaccination plans. SARS-CoV-2 continues to develop, and although a lot has been learned over the last 13 months, it remains a world-wide threat that will continue to affect us through 2021.
The following are some of our most recent collective efforts as a COVID-19 Unified Command supporting the current State of Emergency:

Resources & Staffing

- In early February 2021, FEMA deployed Deputy Federal Coordinating Officer John Covell and a Region II COVID-19 Incident Management Assistance Team (IMAT) in support of the VIDOH and VITEMA. Additional federal assets include a Public Health and Medical Services / Emergency Support Function -8, Liaison, Department of Defense Emergency Procedure Liaison Officer (EPLO) supporting command and control, and 2 Vaccine Inventory Strike Teams (4 individuals per District).

- In late February, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) deployed a COVID-19 subject matter expert (SME) and an Epidemiologist is expected to arrive at the end of this week.

- In late February, the Department of Defense (DOD) deployed Task Force 51 consisting of a 28-member, Type IV Vaccination Strike Team (Clinical Staff). The VIDOH staff is working alongside the DOD team to ensure easy transfer of responsibility in the near future.

Personnel Protective Equipment

- Due to the world-wide shortage of medical gloves, 10,000 medical gloves were pushed from the Strategic National Stockpile (SNS) and arrived last week in the Territory; an
additional 50,000 gloves from the SNS arrived this week. Both medical glove shipments have been equally split between districts.

- VITEMA requested through FEMA 228,000 additional gloves to support vaccination efforts.

- Approximately 32,000 gloves are in the VITEMA warehouse inventory, currently being dispersed and will be monitored to prevent PPE shortages.

Governor Bryan’s Vaccination Goal

- The US Virgin Islands must be prepared to vaccinate a percentage of citizens necessary to achieve “herd immunity”. Current allocations of the vaccine are expected to increase significantly, mass vaccination sites must be made ready to accommodate that increase. 100% of our USVI eligible residents must be offered the opportunity to be vaccinated. Territory’s goal is to vaccinate approximately 50,000 unique individuals with first doses no later than July 1, 2021.

- Testing: The VIDOH’s Epidemiology, Communicable Disease and Office of the Commissioner continues the Boots on the ground outreach with Pop-up testing, drive through testing, and the dissemination of PPEs and educational materials.

- The Territory moved to Phase 3 of Vaccine Administration on March 1, 2021

  Phase 3 of Vaccine Administration includes the General Public and all remaining local GVI agencies. Economic Development Authority, Public Service
Effective March 1, within the US Virgin Islands, all individuals age 16 and older are eligible to receive the COVID-19 vaccination. Other States, Territories, and Commonwealths have not moved as quickly to Phase 3.

Actions in Support of COVID-19 Vaccination Efforts

• VIDOH: Continues to order, distribute, administer, and monitor COVID-19 vaccines through 31 active providers, 6 Federal Pharmacy Partners, VA-Run and Community Vaccination Centers. VIDOH and VING will manage the CVC on STX. Two refrigerators were procured for on-site vaccine storage at CVCs. CVC Site Managers ensuring proper equipment for temperature monitoring installed.

• VIDOH: With last week’s Food and Drug Administration (FDA) Emergency Use Authorization (EUA) of Janssen/Johnson & Johnson single dose COVID-19 vaccination,
900 doses of the Janssen/Johnson & Johnson vaccine have been allocated for the Virgin Islands. The VIDOH is prepared to place an order.

- VITEMA: Continues to lead the COVID-19 vaccination appointment call-in center to support existing providers and CVCs. The VIDOH has recently joined forces with VITEMA in strategically working the call center. With the opening of the two CVCs, VITEMA has drastically reduced its caller backlog, and the collaboration has proven successful. The Call Center team have scheduled approximately 150 appointments per day on St. Croix and 234 appointments on St. Thomas. These efforts effectively provide a 50% increase in vaccine through-put for each district, giving the Territory the capacity of completing 900 “shots in arms” per day, Monday through Friday. With fewer healthcare providers on St. Thomas, the use of the Department of Defense TF 51 Vaccination Strike Team allows for a higher daily through-put.

- Department of Health continues to partner with Department of Tourism (DOT), Virgin Islands Port Authority (VI PA), Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency (VITEMA), and Virgin Islands National Guard (VING) to ensure all persons entering our territory complies with Governor Bryan’s Travel mandate. Currently, VING personnel continues to process a constantly increasing number of passengers at our territory’s airport. Guardsmen have been trained to use QR Scanners to process the arriving passengers to mitigate passenger’s wait time. This has ensured a more efficient process for arriving passengers and a better experience for tourists and locals returning home. Regarding seaports, discussions continue about the reopening of international ferry travel between the USVI and the BVI. The USVI team continues to work with our BVI counterparts to ensure a seamless reopening. We have shared our travel procedures and
are currently clarifying the necessary protocols and expectations for each country. We
will continue to meet until both sides are clear with what is required for entry. The
anticipated opening is now April 15, 2021.

• VING: Along with airport screening, the VING continues to support COVID-19 testing.
  Other missions for the National Guard include: Public Service Announcements at beaches
to remind individuals of early closings on weekends and holidays, transport of COVID-
19 patients from Hospitals to home or medical appointments, and transport of the
ultracold Pfizer vaccination from vaccination Hubs (storage sites) to medical healthcare
providers and CVC sites, and providing support to VIDOH in administering COVID-19
tests at pop-up test sites.

• VI Department of Tourism has done high-level work on the Travel Portal that keeps us
  abreast of the status of those traveling into the Territory and by leading missions on sea
  and airport entries.

• FEMA: Currently leading the Incident Action Planning process with an expansion on the
  following:
    • The Joint USVI COVID-19 Mass Vax Task Force.
    • The Joint COVID-19 Messaging Task Force.

  Joint Information Center (JIC): Created a new vaccine campaign tag line
  “Take your best shot against COVID-19, Get the vaccine.” The JIC expanded
  messaging to include the Vaccine Call-in Center and outreach conducted at
  Faith-Based Organizations.
• FEMA Vaccine Inventory Strike Team completed inventory assessment at 30 providers by the end of February. This allowed us to validate the numbers of vaccines administered versus vaccines on shelves.

• GVI/FEMA: Civil Rights providing technical assistance with Territorial ADA Coordinator on equitable vaccine distribution.

• Veterans Administration, Puerto Rico (VA): Administered approximately 120 1st doses on February 1-2, 2021 and 120 2nd doses on February 24-25, 2021 at the Federally Funded Nissan building in STX. The VA administered 150 1st doses on STT February 18-20 at the Nisky Moravian Church community hall and is scheduled to administer 2nd doses on STT in approximately 4 weeks.

• The COVID-19 Taskforce led by Virgin Islands Police Department (VIPD) with support from the following agencies: Health, Licensing and Consumers Affairs, Planning and Natural Resources, Waste Management Authority, Taxi Cab Commission and the Superior Court Marshalls continues to educate and address those businesses that continue to violate the mandates of the Executive Order. The taskforce also engages with the public by redirecting and educating residents and guests to encourage compliance with health and gathering requirements of the Executive Order.

As the lead agency in this Pandemic, the VIDOH continually seek ways to change our strategy on decreasing the disease spread. Medical countermeasures have been paramount to the COVID response and to the contribution of disease treatment and prevention. The most recent medical countermeasure has been the administration of Monoclonal Antibodies as a treatment measure
and distribution and administration of COVID-19 vaccines as a preventive measure. The
Territory began immunizations on December 17th and has successfully provided shots in arms
through 31 vaccinating providers throughout the Territory. To date, we have given 24,697
vaccines, 16,985 of which are 1st doses and 7,712 2nd doses. As discussed earlier, while we
began immunizing through a phased approach adhering to federal recommendations to vaccinate
the highest risk populations first, we gradually advanced to include additional populations and
opened to the public on March 1st with the simultaneous opening of the Community Vaccination
Centers (CVC) in each district. Although some vaccinating providers have
successfully immunized substantial amounts of people daily, CVCs are a necessary step to
increase the number of individuals vaccinated at a faster pace. Unified vaccination strategies go
hand in hand with a level of trust, understanding, and inclusion which are key aspects in
overcoming vaccine hesitancy and misinformation. Once persons are educated on the importance
of vaccines and make the decision to get vaccinated, the faster we are able to prevent any further
deaths or severe complications. The Department recognizes that acceptance of vaccinations is a
working target. Psychology indicates that vaccine acceptance is dependent on a wide variety of
behaviors and influences, not all members of a society will reach that decision at the same time.
However, through VIDOH mitigation efforts, the re-design of scope and approach will continue
to provide unlimited support. To share the words of Dr. Rochelle Walensky, Director of the
CDC, it is difficult to determine the percentage of those needed to be immunized to achieve herd
immunity because as she indicated, we do not know the “are not” of the virus as variants
continue to surface. We cannot use the predictions from 2019/2020 to project what will happen
in 2021/2022.
However, we at the VIDOH agree with Dr. Walensky in that we simply have to vaccinate as many people as possible. Hence the Community Vaccination Centers. The CVC is an incredible operation that requires multiple agencies to staff, manage, and execute. Local and federal partner agencies, including VITEMA, FEMA, HHS, VIPD, and DOD, have collaborated under the leadership of VIDOH to ensure the CVC in each district is accessible for the immunization of the public without any barriers. The combined efforts of all agencies ensure the scheduling and administration of vaccines as well as the safety at the CVC. Language translation, including sign language and assistance for the disabled is available for use as we consider all social determinants of health. The assistance provided to the Territory to support the CVCs and additional medical countermeasures is a key requisite that will allow us to immunize the community and achieve the Governor’s Guidance: The Virgin Islands will vaccinate 50,000 unique Residents no later than July 1, 2021.

It must be noted that the Unified Command, Governor Albert Bryan’s Taskforce and the VIDOH Emergency Operations Council are cognizant of the variants identified and will continue to closely monitor the effects seen on the US Mainland and the subsequent effects on our Territory. The Administration stands ready and willing to implement proactive precautions based on the Territory’s status and as authorized by the State of Emergency.

If we stand down the State of Emergency, there are internal government factors that will change and create hardships for the territory. During a State of Emergency, government suspends normal constitutional procedures to regain control. The adverse impacts of not extending the State of Emergency are set out in items 13, 14, and 15 of the Plan of Action (Exhibit B of the Governor’s
Request for Extension). We will continue to experience new cases based on the trends on the US Mainland and we are prepared to address the wave accordingly. An extension of the State of Emergency from March 8, 2021 to May 7, 2021 will allow us to better adhere to President Biden’s guidance in opening America.

We ask that the public remain cautious. Due to the insidious nature of the virus in its ability to present as asymptomatic, please continue to wear masks, wash your hands/hand sanitize and continue to practice physical distancing. We all have a role to play in our personal safety as well as that of our family, friends, and community. Please stay “strong” because we have a way to go before this is over, even though we know “this too shall pass”. We ask you the members of the 34th legislature to continue to promote this social responsibility amongst your constituents.

In conclusion, we would like to thank our essential workers, the men and women who have dedicated themselves to ensuring services are maintained, the nurses and physicians at the Governor Juan F. Luis Hospital & Medical Center and the Schneider Regional Medical Center, our Emergency Medical Services Team, and VIDOH nurses and physicians who continuously put their lives at risk. We would also like to thank Governor Albert Bryan, Jr., Lt Governor Tregenza Roach and my colleagues in the Executive Branch who have shown tremendous support over the past 13 months and have said yes, many more times that they have said, “let’s talk about that”. Senators, thank you and the former members of the 33rd Legislature who have supported our request for extension each time we have appeared in front of you. In accordance with Section 11 of the Revised Organic Act of the Virgin Islands of 1954, as amended, and Title 23, Virgin Islands Code Ann. § 1005(d), we are hereby requesting your continued support for the proposed legislation ratifying Governor Bryan’s declaration extending
the State of Emergency due to the COVID-19 global pandemic to enable the Government of the
Virgin Islands to continue its efforts to protect its people. The Department of Health’s team along
with Director Daryl Jaschen, Commissioner Trevor Velinor, Adjutant General Kodjo Knox-
Limbacker, Commissioner Kimberly Causey-Gomez and Commissioner Jean-Pierre Oriol stand
ready for any questions you may have.