



Government of the Virgin Islands

Medical and Emergency Response on the Sister Islands

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1/3/2023

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1.0 Background

As part of the 1999 Public Sector Development Programme (PSDP) initiative, a group called the Young Professionals was tasked with assessing the state of the three major Sister Islands: Anegada, Virgin Gorda and Jost Van Dyke. The activity was aptly called the “Sister Islands Project.” The work of the Young Professionals resulted in the establishment of a Sister Islands Programme and Coordinator. The Unit is a coordinating body which also monitors and reports on Government and other activities on the Sister Islands and makes recommendations for improvements. The Unit also facilitates visits by Government and other special visitors to the Sister Islands.

The Sister Islands Programme covers the following:

- The three (3) main islands of Anegada, Virgin Gorda and Jost Van Dyke. The programme also includes the Southern Cays and the Northern Islands.
- Southern Cays which include:
 - i. Normal Island
 - ii. Peter Island
 - iii. Salt Island
 - iv. Cooper island
 - v. Ginger islands
 - vi. Little Thatch
 - vii. Great Thatch
 - viii. The Indians
 - ix. Fallen Jerusalem
 - x. Buck Island
- Northern Islands which includes:
 - i. Little Jost van Dyke
 - ii. Little Tobago
 - iii. Great Tobago
 - iv. Sandy Spit
 - v. Green Cay
 - vi. Sandy Cay
 - vii. Guana Island
 - viii. Great Camanoe
 - ix. Little Camanoe
 - x. Scrub Island
 - xi. Marina Cay
 - xii. Prickly Pear
 - xiii. Eustacia Island
 - xiv. Necker Island
 - xv. Moskito Island

- xvi. West Dog
- xvii. Great Dog

2.0 Programme Elements

Since 1999, the programme has expanded to take on additional areas that give light to the extensive reach of the Sister Islands Programme Unit. These include:



A. Community Resilience

Community resilience is the sustained ability of a community to utilize available resources to prepare for, respond to, withstand, and recover from adverse situations. This allows for the adaptation and growth of a community after disaster strikes. The Sister Islands Unit covers physical, environmental, social and civil areas of resilience. With the passage of

Hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017, The Sister Islands Unit along with other private organizations, government-based ministries and departments played an integral role in recovery efforts. Additionally, the unit organizes and administers Community Resilience and Community Emergency Response Teams on each island that aids in the risk analysis and overall preparedness of each of the islands. The unit works closely with community-based organizations that include Virgin Gorda Recovery Operations Center, Lions Club, Rotary Clubs, Crisis Intervention Team, VISAR, Churches and other clubs and organization

B. Coordination of Island and Office Administration

The Sister Islands Unit is responsible for the administration and maintenance of government entities on each sister island. This includes but is not limited to: asset management, signage maintenance, and supervision of staff under each government-based department, civil service accommodation, overall island upkeep and coordination of island cleanups. The Sister Island Unit coordinates and organizes government's community meetings on the Sister Islands, some examples of these meetings include Business Licensing act meetings, Liquor Licensing Act Review meetings, National Sustainable Development Act meetings, community meetings with Town and Country planning to discuss community concerns and several others as requested. District Officers on Anegada and Jost van Dyke carry out the duties of Post Office, Inland Revenue and activities for the Social Development Department. The unit is responsible for ensuring that government entities operate as smoothly as possible, meet the needs of clients and find solutions to mitigate any gaps or issues.

C. Island Developmental Improvements

The Sister Islands Unit is charged with identification of economic stimulants throughout the sister islands. This includes the identification of events and projects specific to each Sister Island to act as economic drivers. The unit also looks at ways to address issues that may be a hindrance to current and future economic stimulants, i.e. lack of banking functions, transportation issues, etc. The unit fields complaints and challenges shared by the community, these are entered into a stoplight matrix and shared with permanent secretaries and departments as received, solutions are proposed and discussed in quarterly sister island coordination meetings. The Sister Island Unit also explores ways to build capacity in the public service as well

as residents on the sister islands. Most recently, the unit spearheaded Sail Safe Workshops in collaboration with VISAR, BVI Red Cross, DDM and Customs.

D. Event Planning

Event planning is an essential part of the Sister Islands Unit. Ceremonies for government building handovers, cause-based awareness events, capacity building training and workshops along with additional events proposed by government's statutory bodies, ministries and departments. Some additional events that the unit spearheads or assists with are Anegada Lobster Fest, Virgin Gorda Easter Festival, Foxy's Old Years Party, Christmas in Spanish Town, Christmas in July, Senior Social Events and many others. The Sister Islands Unit looks at ideal dates for events, venues, speakers etc. that will maximize attendance and return on investment for each event or initiative.

E. Communication and Public Relations

One of the main functions of the Sister Islands Unit is to manage relationships, both public and private and make linkages within these areas to solve problems and address concerns. We are also tasked with raising awareness for the Sister Islands and ensuring that each sister island is given the attention and resources they deserve. Additionally, the Sister Islands Unit has launched a quarterly Sister Islands Newsletter that highlights happenings on each sister island and also honours a "Sister Islander of the quarter". The newsletter also includes various tips and has monthly themes. The unit also hosts quarterly coordination meetings with all government permanent secretaries to address any issues or concerns and identifies opportunity for each ministry and department by island.

3.0 Current Analysis of Medical and Emergency Response on the Sister Islands

The Sister Islands unit is commonly referred to as the “eyes and ears on the sister islands”. The unit monitors challenges, logs them within the sister islands matrix and reports at quarterly Sister Islands Coordination Committee meetings. Sister Islands Coordinator also makes contact with supervisors, heads of department as well as permanent secretaries. Residents on the sister islands look at the unit as their conduit for getting improvements done in their communities, this can be as simple as getting a pot hole fixed or as complex as improving medical care being offered on each island.

For the purpose of clarification, emergency response is defined as any systematic response to unexpected or dangerous occurrences. The aim of an emergency response procedure is to mitigate the impact of the event on people and the environment. The goal of this analysis is to thoroughly explore the current situation as it relates to medical care being offered on the Sister Islands and the level of emergency response being given to the populace. It is intended that from this analysis, solutions will be put in place to mitigate some of the ongoing issues.

In 2022, a thorough analysis was carried out of medical and emergency response on each of the main sister islands and also some of the smaller “resort” islands. Interviews were done with the following departments, units and organizations:

- District Officers on each main sister island
- Supervisors of Fire and Rescue Department on each sister island
- Representatives from Royal Virgin Islands Police Force
- Representatives from Health Services Authority

- Business owners – Hospitality-based
- VISAR
- Community Members

Findings from the government-based entities spoke to the following areas:

1. **Lack of Staffing** - All entities spoke to a need for adequate staffing, some departments are working with less than a skeleton staff and are not being given the support they need to carry out their duties.
2. **Lack of Supplies and Equipment** – Some entities expressed having to wait sometimes for one to two months for critical supplies needed to carry out duties. Specifically, Jost van Dyke is without an ambulance which is quite critical for an island with a high elderly population and a high influx of tourists.
3. **Community Awareness** – During a medical emergency, the average sister island resident does not have a full understanding of the process that should be taken after clinical assessment or even which number to call for EMT assistance. Additionally, with the amount of tourists that visit the sister islands it is important that communities are fully aware of steps.
4. **Medical Evacuation** – There is no established process or course of action for emergency response on the sister islands of Jost van Dyke and Anegada. While there is a process for Virgin Gorda, the process is flawed and filled with operational challenges that must be remedied. Unfortunately, at the time of this report, statistics were not available with the number of transfers that were done in 2022, or the number of ambulance calls that were received. Additionally, most

residents opt to use their own connections and resources to get loved ones transported to the main island of Tortola. This poses to be quite stressful for residents and should be established within the ministry and shared with communities. There have been several noted incidences that have taken place over the course of the year that have had ill or damaged residents waiting hours for medical evacuation.

5. **Barracks for Fire and Rescue on each Sister Island** – The lack of barracks on each sister island increase the time it takes for emergency response, especially on the larger sister islands. At this time, only Anegada has barracks. Response time can take up to thirty minutes when officers are not on the premises on other sister islands.

Findings from VISAR:

1. **Protocol and Chain of Command**– If not already developed, need to be shared and followed. Currently, emergencies are being dealt with haphazardly. Instances have been noted where Fire and Rescue has called VISAR to address a call because they were short-staffed or were not able to assist.
2. **Emergency Training for staff at clinics** – Currently, staff at clinics are more general practitioners and are not trained to handle emergencies, but do the best they can, this can be improved.
3. **Training for all staff of Fire and Rescue** – Staff of Fire and Rescue are also charged with managing the ambulance and some are certified EMT's. There are 4 EMT's across the sister islands, with three of them on Virgin Gorda and one on

Anegada. All staff at Fire and Rescue should be trained for medical emergencies even if not trained as EMT's based on their scope of work on the SI's.

4. **Protocol for Loss of Life** – the way loss of life is dealt with currently can be described as inhumane and crass. Family members are not informed in a timely manner of the process and what one can expect. In addition, sometimes the time it takes for forensics to arrive on each sister island can take hours. Each step of this process should be fine-tuned and expedited to mitigate the saddening experience families are dealing with.
5. **Ambulance Boat** – Currently, there is a written agreement between a vessel owner and BVIHSA to transport patients from Virgin Gorda to Beef Island for Medical Evacuation. VISAR has also been used for this purpose on several occasions; there has been no agreement or written protocol to establish this. However, VISAR is called for several types of emergencies and has recently been called for medical evacuation on Anegada.
6. **Lifeguard at the Baths** – In 2022, Virgin Islands Fire and Rescue confirmed over thirty emergent calls at The Baths National Park. Seeing sometimes over 1,000 guests a day on cruise ship call days, it is imperative that lifeguards are placed at this location when the National Park is open. However, there was a full plan developed for this program, but never implemented due to a lack of resources.
7. **Joint Task Force** – There is a necessity for a joint task force to be established on each sister island. This group can be contacted for each emergency, especially in SI's with limited resources. This can increase response time and aid in triaging for emergencies including several persons.

Findings from businesses and community members speak to the following areas:

1. **Lack of Trust in the System** – Community members interviewed shared a common lack of trust in the system and opt to seek medical attention off-island if possible. Additionally, some have even chosen to sign waivers so as to not be transferred to the hospital to receive medical care. Most, do not contact the emergency switch board and make calls directly to persons working with Fire and Rescue or VISAR in the event of an emergency.
2. **Lack of Awareness and Information** – It was shared on sister islands of Jost van Dyke and Anegada that residents have no idea of the steps to be taken in the event of an emergency after the clinic. As most residents own or know someone with a boat, they make contact to expedite evacuation if needed. Residents are in frequent request of this information.
3. **Overall Neglect of the Sister Islands** – Residents share that the sister islands continue to be neglected especially in the area of medical care and emergency response. Virgin Gorda is the only sister island with a daily doctor, however, they have to be called in at night as one is not stationed on site around the clock. On Jost van Dyke, a doctor visits once weekly or sometimes once every two weeks. On Anegada, a doctor was recently stationed from Fridays to Mondays, however this has now become occasional. Residents of the sister islands deserve around the clock medical care which includes doctors permanently stationed at facilities.
4. **Own medical personnel on resort islands** – Resort islands like Oil Nut Bay and Necker Islands, among others have hired paramedics on island to facilitate any

medical challenges that take place. They have also shared a lack of trust in the level of care being offered on the main sister islands.

4.0 Proposed Solutions/Course of Action

The unit has reviewed and discussed significant solutions and a course of action that can assist with immediate improvement of medical care and emergency response services on the Sister Islands:

- **Stakeholder Sessions** – Meetings should be carried out with different entities to fully capture challenges being faced on the ground. Stakeholder meetings should include
 - Health Services Authority and representatives on each island
 - Fire and Rescue
 - Royal Virgin Islands Police Force
 - VISAR
 - Community Members

- **Establishment of Protocols**- Protocols not yet established should be drafted and shared with relevant stakeholders for feedback. Some of these should include:
 1. The role of VISAR in an emergency
 2. The role of Fire and Rescue in an emergency
 3. The chain of command in specific types of emergencies

- **Emergency Training** – Emergency-room trained doctors is needed in all clinics, Fire and Rescue and Royal Virgin Islands Police Force should also be trained for several types of emergencies, this must be the case for first responders.
- **Establishment of Medical Evacuation Processes on Each Sister Island** – Currently, there are no established protocols for medical evacuation on Jost van Dyke or Anegada, there is however a written agreement with a vessel owner on Virgin Gorda, but this needs to be fine-tuned. This process needs to be improved then mirrored on each sister island.
- **Budget for Staffing, Ambulance Boat, Barracks and an Ambulance in 2024** – If not already actioned and budgeted for, staff is desperately needed for Fire and Rescue, Health Services Authority and the Royal Virgin Islands Police Force. A sufficient ambulance boat that can service all sister islands should be budgeted for in the 2024 budget. This boat should be fully-medically equipped and staffed with trained emergency medical technicians able to manage any challenges that are encountered during transfer. Additionally, there is a need for Fire and Rescue Barracks on Virgin Gorda. Firemen are scattered throughout the island and are contacted via cellular phone which are not always dependable. The time it takes to contact all officers on a late-night call and for them to assemble can be the time it takes for a home to burn down or a person to take their last breath. An ambulance is also needed in Jost van Dyke. Persons in emergent conditions have to be sometimes placed in the back of a truck and taken to the dock before transported by boat from the island.
- **Development of quicker requisitioning** – A quicker requisitioning process must be prioritized; departments should not have to wait more than one week for requested items. This goes for Fire and Rescue, Health Services Authority and Royal Virgin Islands Police Force.

- **Community Awareness sessions** – These sessions must take place by the 2nd quarter of 2023. After some of the above actions are taken, communities need to be made aware of the processes in place to benefit them in emergent situations. They also need to be given the chance to ask questions and have their concerns heard.

5.0 Synopsis by Island

Jost van Dyke – Doctor visits once a week or sometimes once every two weeks is insufficient for this Sister Island. A doctor should be stationed on the island at all times. It is hoped that this has been budgeted for and includes accommodations. The island has a high influx of tourists, a high elderly population and a high prevalence of mental health patients. Additionally, the clinic needs renovations as there are structural damages that need to be addressed. The island is in need of an established medical evacuation protocol and is in need of an additional fire officer with barracks. Fire and Rescue also expressed a need for additional equipment like a light, portable pump with foam capabilities that can significantly aid in battling boating fires.

Anegada – It is imperative that a doctor is stationed on the island at all times. It is realized that this may prove costly, however cost should not be a factor when it comes to the health and well-being of residents. Three or four days a week is insufficient for an island with a high influx of tourists, an elderly population and a high prevalence of residents with diabetes and hypertension. The Nurse Romalia Smith Clinic also needs additional staffing as instances of burnout have been noted. An additional paramedic is also needed on the island to better assist during emergencies. Emergency evacuation by

helicopter evacuation or boat, when weather permits. For Anegada this is an urgent priority that must be addressed and continues to pose a challenge.

Virgin Gorda - Adequate staffing for Health Services Authority needs to be prioritized on Virgin Gorda. The clinic in North Sound must also be opened daily to meet the needs of the community, like the health centre in the Valley. A doctor should be present around the clock at both facilities. Additionally, the time it takes for requisitioning of needed supplies must be reduced. As it relates to Fire and Rescue, barracks and equipment like a fully-equipped fire truck with four deliveries at the back and at least a 400-gallon per minute pump with foam capabilities is needed as well. This has been requested for several years and is urgently needed for Fire and Rescue Officers and additional staffing must be prioritized. The Royal Virgin Islands Police Force is also in need of additional staff to adequately police and patrol the island.

6.0 Conclusion

The healthcare and emergency response on the sister islands must be improved to enhance the overall quality of life on the islands. Priority must be given to the establishment of a medical evacuation process on each island. This should not only be taken into consideration for mass events and activities but should be in place for residents on a daily basis. Medical, Fire and Rescue and Police staff should be trained for emergent situations and protocols should be established and shared with community members for their knowledge and peace of mind.

The Sister Islands Unit continues to record and note many challenges that residents and visitors experience in this area of their day-to-day lives. Not knowing where or whom to turn to for assistance, especially on the islands of Anegada and Jost van Dyke gives one an additional anxiety when worrying about the health of a loved one.

We are hopeful that through discussions and targeted initiatives, these areas can be improved significantly and to the well-being of sister island residents.