

# TITLE X GRANTEE PROFILE: U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH FAMILY PLANNING PROGRAM

OCTOBER 2020

The U.S. Virgin Islands Department of Health Family Planning Program (VIFPP) is the only Title X-funded agency in the territory of the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI) and has participated in the Title X program since 1975. The VIFPP is also the territory's only service dedicated to providing voluntary family planning services, with priority given to low-income individuals.

The VIFPP serves an island community with deep roots. The VIFPP program director notes that a large portion of the VIFPP staff has been with the program for approximately two decades: "The staff has seen community members through their lives—the birth of their first baby, their second baby...the staff is really beloved by the community." One of the VIFPP's priorities is to strengthen relationships with prenatal and newborn care providers to increase access to family planning services for newly postpartum women. In addition to providing family planning services, the VIFPP program director also provides prenatal care for residents of the islands of St. Thomas and St. John. By serving as a liaison between pregnant and postpartum women and the VIFPP, she is able to increase awareness of and access to family planning services.

The islands have faced more than their fair share of challenges over the years, including the devastating 2017 hurricanes Irma and Maria. The hurricanes destroyed homes, buildings, infrastructure, and a significant amount of the VIFPP's materials and supplies. The destruction of the local infrastructure presented additional challenges, as the VIFPP replaced lost materials and rebuilt service sites. "We served patients in a flooded building on St. Thomas for weeks, and we had to evacuate our sites on both St. Thomas and St. Croix," says the program director. "As soon as tents and tarps could be raised, we were seeing clients."

The 2017 hurricanes weren't USVI's first devastating natural disasters. Many VIFPP staff members also served through Hurricane Marilyn in 1995 and Hurricane Hugo in 1989. And while not a natural disaster, a territorial Zika epidemic posed other challenges to USVI just one year before hurricanes Irma and Maria. As the program director put it, "We're pretty tough."

## FAST FACTS

HHS Region:	2
Year of initial Title X funding:	1975
Grantee tenure:	45 years
# of service sites:	2

Website: [VIFPP](#)

## COMMUNITY CHALLENGES

- USVI has a high rate of uninsured individuals and is a designated Health Professional Shortage Area.
- The geography exposes USVI to harsh storms and hurricanes, as well as an arduous re-supply process.

# GRANTEE PROFILE: USVI DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH FAMILY PLANNING PROGRAM

In response to the Zika epidemic, USVI and the VIFPP reframed the messaging about family planning services for their community. Because the disease was so widespread and caused a high level of concern, the audience was receptive to the VIFPP's message that delaying pregnancies is the best way to protect against the most harmful effects of the disease.

The epidemic also brought a layer of collaboration with a wider network of epidemiologists, health messaging experts, researchers, and medical experts, as well as an influx of funding to conduct training, support the purchase of contraceptive supplies, promote the availability of services, and research the knowledge, attitudes, and practices surrounding family planning. This research led to the development and publication of the article, "[Community Perspectives on Contraception in the Context of the Zika Virus in the U.S. Virgin Islands: Implications for Communication and Messaging](#)," in the *Women's Health Issues* journal.

While Zika provided an opportunity for the VIFPP to dig deeper into its family planning messaging, grassroots efforts were also expanding other types of family planning outreach and education. For the past few years, VIFPP has supported Project Promise, a grassroots organization started by a former VIFPP staff member. Project Promise engages schools and other communities to reach teenagers across the region, connecting them to education and life skills support, including family planning.

More recently, the VIFPP has demonstrated its resilience by pivoting in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Like many of its stateside counterparts, the VIFPP has successfully adopted mitigation strategies, including telemedicine and temporary suspension of non-urgent visits.

--

*Special thanks to Meg Sheahan, M.S.N., C.N.M., M.P.H., VIFPP program director and clinical service provider, for her contributions to this story.*

## ABOUT TITLE X

For 50 years, Title X family planning clinics have played a critical role in ensuring access to a broad range of family planning and related preventive health services for millions of low-income or uninsured individuals and others. Title X is the only federal grant program dedicated solely to providing individuals with comprehensive family planning and related preventive health services.

LEARN MORE AT [OPA.HHS.GOV](https://opa.hhs.gov)