

VA Caribbean Healthcare System Servicing the United States Virgin Islands

White Paper for the Senior Plenary Session of the Interagency Group on Insular Areas

Purpose: To provide information about healthcare services provided to Veterans residing in the Virgin Islands of the United States by the VA Caribbean Healthcare System (VACHS).

Background:

The Virgin Islands of the United States are an unincorporated, organized territory. They were transferred from Denmark to the United States on March 31, 1917. They are under a Revised Organic Act dated July 22, 1954. These insular areas of the United States are geographically part of the Virgin Islands archipelago, located in the Leeward Islands of the Lesser Antilles. The U.S. Virgin Islands consist of the main islands of Saint Croix, Saint John and Saint Thomas, along with the much smaller but historically distinct Water Island and many other surrounding minor islands. The total land area of the territory is 133.73 square miles (346.4 km.) As of the 2000 census the population was 108,612. Of these 5,152 are Veterans.

Current Situation:

Veterans seeking health care in the Virgin Islands enter the VA Caribbean Healthcare System, which is comprised of the main medical center in San Juan, Puerto Rico (San Juan VAMC), outpatient multispecialty clinics in Mayaguez and Ponce and Community Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOC's) in Arecibo, Guayama, Saint Thomas and Saint Croix; Rural Health Clinics in Utuado, Comerio, and Vieques, and an outreach center in St John.

Veterans receiving care directly from CBOC's are referred to community providers in the Virgin Islands (fee basis), depending on the type and availability of care needed. Veterans are eligible to have their care authorized by VA and provided in the community for their service connected conditions. In fiscal year 08, total cost of outpatient care services for Veterans in the Virgin Islands was \$1,141,062.84, in fiscal year 09 was \$1,668,010.65 and fiscal year 10 was \$1,504,185.20. Most Virgin Islands' veterans come to the San Juan VAMC for specialty care or hospitalization. Round trip airfare from the Virgin Island to San Juan, Puerto Rico is about \$398.00; flight duration is approximately 35 minutes one way. Travel expenses are covered by VACHS when authorized. Transportation from and to the airport and San Juan VA is provided by VACHS. Hotel services are made available to those Veterans who require overnight accommodations. Prescriptions written by providers in the Virgin Islands are filled by the San Juan VAMC pharmacy and mailed directly to them. The Saint Croix CBOC has a limited pharmacy facility.

Other Issues:

Although Veterans in the Virgin Islands receive full services from VACHS, they have advocated strongly for their own medical center and cemetery. The travel experience for most patients and their significant others, in order to get specialized care in San Juan, is challenging, specially for Veterans with multiple conditions and limitations.

Transportation from St John to St Croix or St Thomas is via air or boat.