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EDUCATION

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Inaugural Safety and Security Tours Underway at Schools Territorywide

ST. THOMAS, USVI – The Virgin Islands Department of Education's (VIDE) Division of Disaster Planning and School Security has organized a series of school tours with first-responding agencies to assess the safety and security of the Territory's public-school campuses in the event of an emergency, crisis, or threat. Professionals with the Virgin Islands Fire Service, Virgin Islands Police Department, Virgin Islands Rescue, EMS, and the Department of Education's Facilities Division are participating in the tours.

On the heels of the recent mass shooting at Robb Elementary in Uvalde, TX that claimed the lives of 19 students and two school employees, Irvin Mason, VIDE's director of disaster planning and school security, along with the Department's Chief Operations Officer Dr. Dionne Wells-Hedrington said this is the first of what will become annual campus tours organized for the sole purpose of identifying and addressing potential security weaknesses on school campuses. Until now, campus tours have focused on maintenance and environmental issues. When the security assessments are completed, findings will be shared publicly.

"We realized that we have different issues when it comes to security and safety of students and staff within our schools," Wells-Hedrington said. "We participated in the LSU Active Threat training earlier this month and decided to coordinate walkthroughs of every school with the necessary external partners to ensure that when we develop and update our school crisis management plans with the input of the Fire Service, VIPD, Rescue and EMS, we would be right on target of where we need to be. When we move forward with making sure our schools are where they are supposed to be with crisis plans updated, personnel trained and drills conducted,

we would feel comfortable knowing that our campuses are secure and would know what to do in the event of an emergency."

Mason, who comes from a background of emergency planning at VITEMA, said, "This is not a walkthrough to prepare for hurricanes or other natural disasters; these are walkthroughs to assess the safety and security of our students, faculty, and staff in schools. This is just in case we have an active shooter, if there is someone that comes onto the campus to disturb classes or an irate parent, we will know what to do."

He continued, "We are creating and updating response plans for the Department of Education and for each school. Each of the first-responding agencies will receive a copy of these plans, so if a situation arises at any of our schools, first responders will know what to do and how to access the campuses quickly. We are creating a very comprehensive plan."

According to St. Croix Fire Marshal Henry Joseph, focus areas are exits, fencing, security of windows and doors, and the establishment of safe zones, among others.

"Safe and correct use of egress or exits, which include panic bars and doors with locks—offering key access on the outside and a latch on the inside," he explained. "We are also looking at secured windows and doors—those that are not easily kicked in or penetrated."

Joseph went on to say that fencing around the parameter of the campuses should be standardized.

"Fencing should be high enough where people from the outside cannot climb over to vandalize the buildings or create havoc in the schools," he said. "Generally, school fencing should be at least eight to ten feet high."

Furthermore, when it comes to identifying a safe zone for campus evacuations, Joseph said an up-wind location is ideal.

"Our winds generally flow from east to the west, and if there is a fire, most times, smoke travels to the west," he said. "So, your safe zone is best located up-wind. Plus, ensure the area is large enough to hold everyone."

St. Croix Rescue Chief Gregory Richards said the areas he is focused on have to do with proper access for emergency vehicles and the adequacy of First Aid kits, among others.

"The things we are concerned with are easy access for ambulances, rescue and fire apparatuses onto campuses, and also the beefing up of campus medical stations," he said. "Most schools have an Automatic External Defibrillator onsite, but you should also have First Aid kits immediately available and strategically positioned, so if something were to happen, school personnel can immediately begin taking care of the wounded prior to the arrival of ambulances or medical personnel."

He continued, “I saw the AED signage at some schools, but I would like to see the First Aid kits to ensure they are adequately supplied and adequate for the type of situations schools are likely to have.”

Richards also stressed the necessity of schools having a bleeding control kit onsite.

“The recent history of the incidents at schools should guide us of the possibility of the things that we might encounter at our schools here” he said. “You definitely want to have a bleeding control kit, along with the First Aid medical bag and the AED. The AED signage has been encouraging, so we just have to take it up a notch. I like to know that the children are safe.”

Police Sgt. Charles Orange, commander of school security and youth investigation bureau, agreed with the assessments of the other professionals.

“It is good they are going to take measures to further ensure the safety of the campuses, including installing camera systems, which can help a lot,” he said. “If we make these necessary adjustments, I think we will be okay.”

Mason said emergency officials have preliminarily determined that many of the schools they have visited are in good condition security-wise.

“We do have things that we need to address, such as fencing, intercom systems, and cameras, but our campuses are fairly secure,” he said.

Wells-Hedrington said her unit is working on an RFP to purchase intercom systems for schools needing them and that funding is available for safety upgrades to be made.

“We will be sending a template to school principals so that they can provide us with the number of indoor and outdoor intercoms they need, as well as look at the layout of the schools to identify where cameras should be strategically installed,” she said. “We don’t want to wait until something happens on one of our campuses to make these important changes.”

Mason, whose division recently sponsored the “Surviving an Active Threat: Run. Hide. Fight.” training conducted by Louisiana State University’s National Center for Biomedical Research and Training, said the Department is taking a proactive approach to securing its campuses.

“At the Department of Education, we want to be proactive in the event that we are faced with a situation,” he said. “All of these changes will not take place overnight—we are doing the assessments, we will create or update crisis plans, and then we will begin conducting drills and exercises.”

Wells-Hedrington said federal funds the Department received to supplement teaching and learning during COVID-19 will be used to fund the security upgrades.

“We have had discussions with the district superintendents on their ARPA funds, so money has been set aside in both districts to address these safety concerns,” she said. “What was holding us

back was these assessments being completed and really figuring out what we needed to address on each campus. Now that we are collecting the data, we will be sitting down with territorial facilities director Davidson Charlemagne, my team, and the operations division's engineers and architects, to come up with the specific scopes. We also have assessments that were completed by DLR Group, which was contracted independently. We will make sure those scopes have captured everything and if anything is missing, my team will add to it."

"This has been on our mind for some time and now that we have the funding to execute it, we are pleased about that and will continue to move forward," Wells-Hedrington continued. "We encourage contractors to bid on these projects when they become available very soon."

St. Croix campus safety tours will continue through June 30; St. Thomas-St. John tours were conducted the week of June 20-24.

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