

Message from Executive Director John Kanig

In our last newsletter, we highlighted several engagements that demonstrated the value of the HIDTA Program. Developments that made headlines across Puerto Rico in late August further illustrated the program's steadfast commitment to its mission.

On August 27, 2026, the PR-USVI HIDTA participated in a press conference at the U.S. Attorney's Office for the District of Puerto Rico. Led by Attorney General Todd Blanche, the event announced federal charges against 81 members of a violent drug trafficking organization following a Homeland Security Task Force investigation. The press conference underscored the strong coordination among state and federal law enforcement partners, including the FBI, ICE–HSI, CBP, U.S. Marshals Service, DEA, ATF, IRS, U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. Coast Guard Investigative Service, U.S. Postal Inspection Service, TSA, FAA, and the U.S. Attorney's Offices for the Districts of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Over the last several months, the PR-USVI HIDTA has been making some much-needed changes to our facilities that house our initiatives. We are currently in the process of renovating the third floor of our HIDTA building here in Puerto Rico to accommodate our HSTF Task Force. Once completed, this new office space will house over 80 Special Agents, Task Force Officers, and Intelligence Analysts. This move brings HSTF personnel in from satellite offices to be collocated under one roof. This will help increase operational efficiencies, enhance investigative coordination, and synchronize intelligence sharing among the HSTF partners. We look forward to the completion of this project by early 2027.

Finally, we have been coordinating with ATF as they plan to return to the US Virgin Islands. ATF will collocate two agents at the St. Croix Initiative, and work jointly with the partner agencies throughout the region. We look forward to their return as they represent a force multiplier for this HIDTA.

PR-USVI HIDTA PARTNERS





PR-USVI HIDTA 3rd Quarter 2026 Newsletter

On August 27th, 2026, Attorney General Todd Blanche announced that 81 members of a violent drug trafficking organization had been charged federally following a Homeland Security Task Force investigation. The FBI and the Puerto Rico Police Department successfully led the takedown and arrest of 70 defendants charged who are members of this violent drug trafficking organization that had been active for years throughout the west side of Puerto Rico. During this investigation, law enforcement seized 21 firearms. It is estimated that during the span of the conspiracy, this drug trafficking organization was responsible for the distribution of at least 340 kilograms of fentanyl or fentanyl-laced narcotics, and at least 2,200 kilograms of cocaine, among other drugs, generating over $49 million in proceeds.



Attorney General Todd Blanche speaking at a press conference about the arrest of 81 members of a violent drug trafficking organization.

ATF TO REESTABLISH ITS PRESENCE IN THE U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS



ATF ASAC John Dion, ATF RAC Miguel Sepulveda, ATF SAC Jason Stankiewicz, Police Commissioner Mario Brooks, and PR-USVI HIDTA Director John Kanig.

ATF is planning to reestablish its presence in the U.S. Virgin Islands. Two senior agents have been selected to begin their assignments on October 1, 2026. The agents will be based out of the HIDTA St. Croix Initiative and will have investigative responsibilities across St. Croix, St. Thomas, and St. John. On September 16, 2026, HIDTA participated in meetings between ATF and two key territorial partners. U.S. Attorney Adam Sleeper for the District of the Virgin Islands discussed investigative priorities and violent crime, pledging full prosecutorial support when ATF returns.

Later that day, Virgin Islands Police Department Commissioner Mario Brooks discussed the department's strategies for reducing violent crime and said ATF's presence would strengthen territory-wide efforts against gun trafficking and violent crime.

STRENGTHENING INTELLIGENCE CAPABILITIES

The PR-USVI HIDTA Intelligence Support Center (ISC) provided Basic Intelligence Training to National Guard Counterdrug Task Force analysts assigned to PR-USVI HIDTA initiatives, as well as Task Force Officers from the PR Police Department, PR Special Investigations Bureau (NIE), and Bayamon Municipal Police Department. These personnel provide critical intelligence support to the ISC and HIDTA initiatives.



Participants and trainers pose for a picture in front of the HIDTA ISC located in the PR-USVI HIDTA building in Puerto Rico.

The training was delivered by Intelligence Research Specialists from the DEA and was designed to equip analysts with valuable tools and techniques to enhance the development of criminal investigations.

The curriculum covered a range of intelligence-related capabilities to enhance the ability of participating agencies to develop actionable intelligence and provide effective support to criminal investigations and HIDTA initiatives throughout PR and USVI.

PUERTO RICO TEAM

OVERDOSE RESPONSE STRATEGY

2026 INTERNATIONAL OVERDOSE AWARENESS DAY

Community engagement was further advanced in connection with International Overdose Awareness Day, observed on August 31. Along with the Centro de Servicios Primarios de Salud de Patillas (CSPSP), the PR ORS team conducted an outreach initiative centered on overdose awareness, education, and naloxone access. In Patillas CSPSP facilities, educational materials developed to help community members recognize and respond to an overdose were distributed to patients throughout the health center and during outreach to local government and public safety partners. Twenty-nine individuals participated in the initiative, and 16 naloxone kits were distributed, placing overdose response resources directly into the hands of community members.



Dr. Luismiguel Rodríguez-Ríos and Ana Martínez-Sanz, from the Department of Behavioral Health, handing opioids overdose educational flyers and naloxone kits to patients in CSPSP waiting room, Patillas.

International Overdose Awareness Day outreach was also extended to Maunabo, where personnel from the CSPSP satellite clinic and the PR ORS team visited the Maunabo Municipal Police, the Puerto Rico Police Bureau station in Maunabo, and the municipal Citizen Assistance Office. Naloxone kits were provided by the Mental Health and Against Addiction Services Administration (ASSMCA in Spanish) and educational materials were distributed during these visits, extending prevention messaging and overdose response resources to additional public safety and community partners.

PR ORS TRAINING THE SAN JUAN MUNICIPAL POLICE

The PR ORS team delivered the "Manejo y Apoyo ante el Riesgo de Suicidio" (Suicide Risk Management and Support) course to 28 San Juan Municipal Police (SJMP) officers. The training incorporated mental health concepts and focused on recognizing warning signs and symptoms, appropriate intervention, and awareness of available support resources. In a separate occasion, 32 SJMP officers received specialized opioid overdose recognition and response training, including instruction on identifying an opioid overdose, administering naloxone, and applying essential response protocols.

Naloxone kits and educational handouts for the attendants were provided by the San Juan Municipal Department of Health. Together, these activities provided 60 law enforcement officers with additional knowledge and practical skills relevant to behavioral health and overdose-related emergencies.



Public Health Analyst (PHA) Francisco Torres-Cardona facilitates the Suicide Risk Management and Support training to SJMP.

BUILDING FIRST RESPONDERS READINESS THROUGH INTEGRATED TRAINING IN SALINAS

In coordination with the HIDTA Puerto Rico Training Program, the PR ORS team delivered a comprehensive series of three specialized training sessions to personnel from the Salinas Municipal Police Department, with the collaboration from the CSPSP satellite clinic of Salinas. Conducted at the Founder's Museum facilities in Salinas, the initiative brought together three critical areas of public health and public safety: Opioid Overdose Response (OOR), Drug Identification, and Suicide Prevention.

The OOR training provided participants with practical knowledge to recognize the signs and symptoms of an opioid overdose, administer naloxone, and take appropriate action during an overdose emergency. The Drug Identification Course enhanced officers' awareness of current drug trends in Puerto Rico, including the recognition of commonly encountered substances, their effects, methods of use, street terminology, and packaging. The Suicide Prevention session complemented these topics by addressing the recognition of warning signs and risk factors associated with suicide and behavioral health crises, while emphasizing early identification, supportive engagement, and connection to appropriate resources.

Delivering these three disciplines as part of a coordinated training initiative provided participants with a broader perspective on the complex situations law enforcement officers may encounter in the field. The sessions reinforced the intersection between substance use, overdose risk, mental health, and public safety while providing officers with practical information that can be applied both professionally and within their communities.



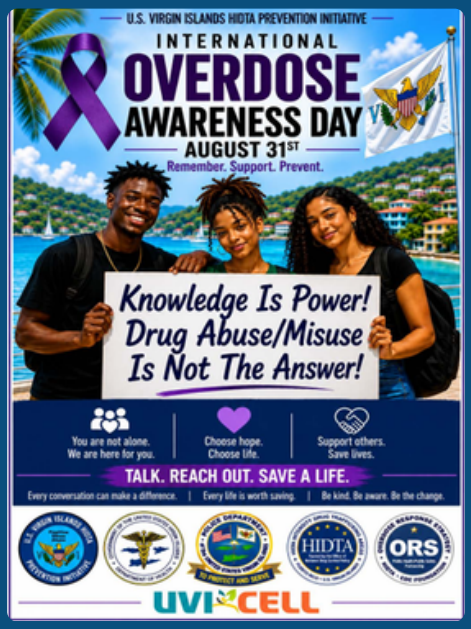
Left: Drug Intelligence Officer (DIO) José Betancourt providing updated information on psychoactive substances through a Drug Identification training session to the Salinas Municipal Police; Right: PHA Francisco Torres-Cardona during a suspected opioid overdose demonstration.



2026 INTERNATIONAL OVERDOSE AWARENESS DAY

The US Virgin Islands HIDTA Prevention Initiative DIO and PHA team created 2 flyers to bring awareness to International Drug Overdose Awareness Day (August 31, 2026). They requested the participation of various federal and local agencies and departments by them posting the flyers on their social media pages and official websites on the 31st.





Participating agencies and departments included the Virgin Islands Police Department, University of the Virgin Islands Center for Excellence in Leadership (CELL), Drug Enforcement Administration (Caribbean Division), Virgin Islands Department of Health, and the Virgin Islands Department of Education. The flyers were also shared on the USVI HIDTA Prevention Initiative Instagram and Facebook pages, and on various other local social media platforms. Based on feedback, and seeing the flyers posted on the various platforms, this initiative was a success. "Sharing information on drug overdose brings awareness, and as a result, save lives".

USVI PHA ATTENDS "THE LOFT" OPENING ON ST. CROIX

USVI PHA Talisa Griffith-Simmonds attended the opening of "The Loft" on St. Croix, a safe and brave space for youths ages 12 to 18 to congregate, create, communication, and build meaningful skills to be a value stakeholder in the prevention continuum. PHA Griffith-Simmonds shared information on the US Virgin Islands HIDTA Prevention Initiative ORS initiatives and spoke about opportunities for collaboration.





Left: PHA Talisa Griffith-Simmonds engaging with youths at opening of "The Loft". Right: Youths listening to a presenter at the opening ceremonies.

USVI PHA PARTICIPATES IN MARLEY COMMUNITY WELLNESS DAY

US Virgin Islands HIDTA Prevention Initiative Public Health Analyst Talisa Griffith-Simmonds participated in the Marley Community Wellness Day held on June 26, 2026, at the Marley Housing Community in Frederiksted, St. Croix. The initiative brought together community partners including the US Virgin Islands HIDTA Prevention Initiative, Virgin Islands Housing Authority, Virgin Islands Department of Health, Greater Changes, Frederiksted Health Care, and other service providers, to connect residents with free health screenings, wellness information, prevention education, and valuable community resources.

During the event, PHA Griffith-Simmonds collaborated with participating organizations, shared educational materials on substance-use prevention, mental health, prescription drug safety, overdose awareness, and available support services, and promoted the U.S. Virgin Islands Prescription Drug Drop Box Program. She also engaged directly with Marley's youth, encouraging them to make healthy choices, understand the risks associated with alcohol and drug misuse, and recognize the importance of seeking help from trusted adults. The event provided a meaningful opportunity to build relationships with residents, strengthen partnerships, and bring essential prevention and wellness resources directly into the community.







PHA Talisa Griffith-Simmonds promoting USVI HIDTA Prevention Initiative projects, including the highly successful Prescription Drug Drop Box Program.

USVI PREVENTION INITIATIVE TEAM SUPPORTS VETERANS MENTAL HEALTH SUMMIT

On August 6, 2026, the USVI HIDTA Prevention Initiative team attended Breaking Barriers, Building Hope: USVI Community Mental Health Summit 2026, to support ongoing efforts to promote mental wellness, reduce stigma, and connect veterans and their families with essential resources and services. Hosted by the Virgin Islands Office of Veterans Affairs, the summit brought together veterans, community leaders, service providers, and advocates committed to strengthening behavioral health support throughout the U.S. Virgin Islands. The event featured expert presentations and discussions on suicide prevention, recovery-focused mental health care, services for veterans, support for military families and caregivers, women's mental health, and community-based resources.

Right: Major General Kodjo Knox-Limbacker, Adjutant General of the VING, Sherishma Pennyfeather, Director of Psychological Health for the VING, USVI Public Health Analyst Talisa Griffith-Simmonds, and Patrick Farrell, Director of the Virgin Islands Office of Veterans Affairs; Below: People attending the summit.





PHA Griffith-Simmonds shared educational materials about the Drug Drop Box Initiative, which promotes the safe disposal of unused and expired medications. PHA Griffith-Simmonds connected with Major General Kodjo Knox-Limbacker, Adjutant General of the Virgin Islands National Guard (VING); Sherishma Pennyfeather, Director of Psychological Health for the VING; and Patrick Farrell, Director of the Virgin Islands Office of Veterans Affairs. Participation in the summit strengthened collaboration among public health, public safety, military, veterans' services, and community partners working to advance mental wellness, prevent substance misuse, and build safer communities throughout the territory.

US VIRGIN ISLANDS PRESCRIPTION DRUG DROP BOX PROGRAM

The U.S. Virgin Islands HIDTA Prevention Initiative Prescription Drug Drop Box program collected 59.3 pounds (26.89 kilograms) of prescription drugs from the five drop boxes territory wide during the 3rd Quarter of 2026. The St. Thomas/St. John district collected 37.3 pounds (16.9 kilograms), and the St. Croix district collected twenty-two pounds (9.97 kilograms). This brings the program to a total of 361.84 pounds (164.127 kilograms) collected since its launch on February 12, 2025. "Our campaign to inform our community is working, along with people sharing the information with their family, coworkers, and friends.

The US Virgin Islands HIDTA Prevention Initiative, along with PR-USVI HIDTA, the Virgin Islands Police Department, Drug Enforcement Administration, US Postal Service, VI Department of Health and the people of the US Virgin Islands are doing our part in keeping our Virgin Islands safe by collecting, and properly disposing of expired, unneeded prescriptions drugs. Thank you USVI for collaborating with us," DIO Rodney F. Querrard.





PRVI TRAINING INITIATIVE

The PRVI HIDTA Training Initiative conducted in the third quarter of 2026, 5 different core courses, and 2 novel training sessions. The novel sessions consisted of FLETC'S Tactical Medical Training for Instructors, and first responders. The Tactical Medical Training Sessions took place at the San Juan Police Department Academy in San Juan, P.R. These sessions were attended by police officers from the SJPD and from the PRPD-FURA, a PRVI HIDTA designated Initiative:

A. (1) FLETC Tac Med - Instructor Training Program July 13-15, 2026
B. (2) FLETC Tac Med for First Responder Training Program July 16 & 17, 2026

Our 5 core sessions for the third quarter of 2026 were divided into the following courses:

- A comparison of The Federal and Puerto Rico Court Systems
- Court Testimony with Tabletop Exercises
- Comprehensive Community Policing
- Probable Cause - Arrest -and Case Presentation in Court
- Police Sworn Statements in Drug Investigations with Tabletop Exercises







Above: FLETC'S Tactical Medical Training - July 2026; Below: Community Policing – Guayama PR, Regional Municipal Police Department Training – August 2026.







DEA HIDTA TASK FORCE 4 HSTF INVESTIGATION ROSA DE LOS COMPAS

As a part of the Fentanyl Free America Initiative, Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) HIDTA-HSTF Group 4 conducted two controlled delivery operations on July 7, 2026. HIDTA Group 4 has been investigating a Transnational Criminal Organization that is responsible for the shipment of multikilogram of fentanyl parcels via the U.S. Mailing system from California to Puerto Rico. On July 3, 2026, DEA HIDTA Group 4 agents received information of three parcels that were sent by a foreign target under this investigation from various US Postal Offices throughout southern California to Vega Baja and Vega Alta, Puerto Rico. US Postal Inspectors executed federal search warrants for all three parcels and discovered 6.22 kilograms of fentanyl. Two targets were arrested as a result of the controlled delivery operations. One .45 caliber Springfield Armory SA-XD was seized from one of the targets alongside one magazine filled with ammunition.

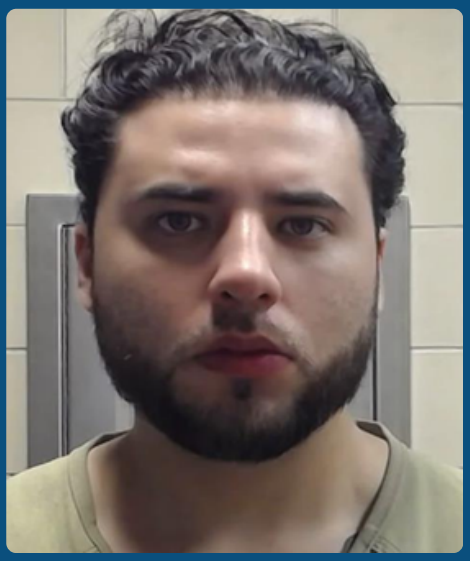




Left: Drug exhibits seized during the investigation; Center: Weapon seized; Right: Seized drugs

DEA CARIBBEAN HSTF GROUP 1 (HIDTA) AND PORT AUTHORITY POLICE OF NY & NJ ARREST FUGITIVE

On August 11, 2026, DEA Caribbean HSTF Group 1 (HIDTA) working in conjunction with the Port Authority Police of NY & NJ arrested federal fugitive Chazz David CARTER-Justiniano aka "EL BOLIVIANO"/ "EL BOLI" in New York, New York (NY). CARTER-Justiniano was wanted for Fraudulent Accosting by the Port Authority Police of NY & NJ for posing as a John F. Kennedy (JFK) airport taxi driver and charging $563 USD to a citizen for a taxi ride from JFK to Manhattan, NY in events that transpired in May 2026. On August 12, 2026, CARTER-Justiniano was transferred to the United States Marshals for initial appearance and respective transfer to de District of Puerto Rico (DPR). On June 26, 2025, CARTER-Justiniano was indicted in the DPR along with Kristian Yadiel FALCÓN-López and Natalia Nicole DÍAZ-García for conspiracy to distribute cocaine and conspiracy to launder monetary instruments.



Chazz David CARTER-Justiniano aka "EL BOLIVIANO"/ "EL BOLI"

CARTER-Justiniano was part of a DTO that used drug mules to smuggle cocaine from Puerto Rico to the Continental United States via commercial flights departing from the Luis Muñoz Marín International Airport in Carolina, Puerto Rico. On July 15, 2026, both FALCON-Lopez and DÍAZ-García were arrested in Toa Alta and Fajardo, Puerto Rico, respectively. On that same date, DEA Caribbean HSTF Group 1 (HIDTA) agents executed a search warrant at FALCÓN-López's residence which resulted in the seizure of a Glock G27 with a machine gun conversion device. However, CARTER-Justiniano remained at large until his apprehension on August 11, 2026.

ST. THOMAS HIDTA

As a result of ongoing interdiction efforts, the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) St. Thomas Resident Office (STRO), in conjunction with Homeland Security Investigations (HIS) RAC St. Thomas and Customs & Border Protection (CBP) Air & Marine Operations (AMO) St. Thomas Marine Unit (STTMU) investigated a suspected DTO / MLO operating between Puerto Rico and St. Thomas, USVI.





Arrested individuals Cruz Restor and Torres Cruz

On July 21, 2025, in the early morning hours, federal agents were notified of a "lights out" vessel moving eastbound from Culebra, Puerto Rico toward St. Thomas, USVI. Members of Customs and Border Protection Air and Marine Operations (CBP AMO) responded and were able to locate the vessel which was traveling back toward Culebra. The target vessel was occupied by two unknown individuals later identified as Carlos CRUZ RESTO and Jean Carlos TORRES CRUZ. The target vessel started to jettison large duffle bags into the water which resulted in an interdiction stop. The subjects were taken into custody without incident. Ultimately, the two duffle bags were recovered from the open water and determined to contain approximately 77 kilograms of cocaine.

This investigation was prosecuted in the District of the Virgin Islands. CRUZ RESTO pled guilty to Conspiracy to Possess w/ Intent to Distribute Cocaine and Possession w/ Intent to Distribute Cocaine in March 2026. TORRES CRUZ decided to go to trial and in August 2026 was found Guilty of Conspiracy to Possess w/ Intent to Distribute Cocaine and Possession w/ Intent to Distribute Cocaine. Sentencing for CRUZ RESTO and TORRES CRUZ has yet to be scheduled.



Left: Arrest team and targets; Right: Seized boat.



HSTF OPERATION JEFE DE PUEBLO (LEGACY OCDETF)

On Wednesday, September 2nd, 2026, Dominican authorities extradited Fidel Antonio Knight-Cerda to the United States to face drug trafficking and money laundering charges filed in the District of Puerto Rico. USMS successfully extradited Fidel Knight Cerda, the final member of the case Jefe De Pueblo.



Fidel Antonio Knight-Cerda, with arresting Agents.

VIRGIN ISLANDS FUSION CENTER



US VIRGIN ISLANDS PRESCRIPTION DRUG DROP BOX PROGRAM

"A US VIRGIN ISLANDS HIDTA PREVENTION INITIATIVE"

PRESCRIPTION DRUG DROP BOXES ARE CONVENIENTLY LOCATED AT "5" LOCATIONS IN THE US VIRGIN ISLANDS:



St. Thomas: ***Sugar Estate Post Office***
Frenchtown Post Office

St. Croix: ***Kingshill Post Office***
Gallows Bay Post Office

St. John: ***Cruz Bay Post Office***



Let's all do our part to keep our community safe by utilizing the drop boxes to dispose of expired or unwanted medications! TOGETHER WE CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE, AND SAVE LIVES!





In partnership with the US Virgin Islands Police Department, PR-USVI High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA), Overdose Response Strategy/CDC, Department of Health, Drug Enforcement Administration, and the US Postal Service

Questions? Email us at VIHIDTA@GMAIL.COM



