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Class for taxi drivers to start Feb. 1

By MEGAN POINSKI

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Daily News Photo by MEGAN POINSKI Sen. Shawn-Michael Malone listens as Ilene Garner, director of the UVI CELL program, talks about taxi certification at the West Indian Co. Ltd. dock on Friday afternoon.

ST. THOMAS - There are still spots available in the University of the Virgin Islands class to teach taxi drivers and tour operators to be better ambassadors of Virgin Islands culture, history and hospitality.

The next UVI Community Engagement and Lifelong Learning Center's class begins Feb. 1. The program is a six-week course for licensed drivers to increase their knowledge of Virgin Islands history, as well as to improve their customer service skills.

The six-week program, which runs through March 8, costs \$250. Military veterans can take this and all UVI CELL courses for free.

Sen. Shawn-Michael Malone, UVI CELL director Ilene Garner and other UVI officials, officials from the Tourism Department and U.S. Virgin Islands Hotel and Tourism Association, and graduates of the certification program stressed the importance of the program at a press conference Friday at the WICO dock.

"Other destinations are very competitive," said Orlando Donadelle, a graduate of the program and a certified taxi driver. "We have to stay ahead and get in step."

Donadelle said that taxi drivers are the first and last people that tourists see, and they need to take every opportunity to show them the kind of hospitality and tours that they will want to come back for.

Last year, UVI CELL graduated 17 taxi drivers from the inaugural Taxi and Tour Certification program. These taxi drivers and tour guides wear certification badges, have stickers on their vehicles signifying their additional training, and have formed their own association.

Garner said that the program is a collaborative effort, combining the expertise and support of the university, the V.I. Tourism Department and the U.S. Virgin Islands Hotel and Tourism Association.

"This is one of our greatest successes in terms of partnership," Garner said.

Although the program now is offered only on St. Thomas, Garner said that similar classes will be offered in the near future for taxi drivers and tour operators on St. John and St. Croix.

Malone said that the program is an important way for taxi drivers to become better cultural ambassadors and to improve the territory's tourism product. He encouraged all taxi drivers to enroll in the program. The drivers - and the entire territory - will reap the benefits, he said.

"If we are serious about tourism being our No. 1 industry, we have to invest in it all the time," Malone said.

For more information on the program, contact UVI CELL at 693-1100 or go to <http://cell.uvi.edu>.

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