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Governor Bryan Updates Residents on COVID-19

U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS — During a press conference Monday to update residents on COVID-19, Governor Albert Bryan Jr. gave an indication of his plans for a phased-reopening of the Territory's economy and provided details on several financial issues directly affecting the community.

The Governor also announced the Territory's fourth fatality from COVID-19, a 67-year-old St. Croix woman who died in her home and had not been hospitalized and tested positive for the virus after her death.

To date, 780 individuals have been tested for the novel coronavirus, with 716 of them testing negative for the virus, and 59 testing positive. Of those who tested positive, 51 have recovered, and five tests are pending.

The Governor said he is preparing to issue a new executive order that will describe the phased reopening of non-essential businesses and the guidelines by which they are to adhere. He also pointed out that the current stay-at-home order expires at midnight on April 30.

Governor Bryan likened his approach to reopening the economy to a three-legged stool, with one leg representing safety and the public health, one leg representing the USVI's economic concerns and the third leg representing our rights to personal freedoms.

"Over the next few weeks, and perhaps months, we will try to optimize the balance of these concerns. That will require some trial and error. As we approach this phased reopening, we will take things one step at a time," Governor Bryan said. "If we find that we are heading in the wrong direction as a community, we will fall back to the prior restrictions. Our progress depends on the cooperation of the general public.

"Part of our roll-out will include an alert system, and we will try to make our decisions and the reasons for those decisions as clear and transparent as possible," he said.

The Governor also said that during the next two weeks he will be sending legislation for consideration to the 33rd Legislature, including efforts to change the definition of "in person," which Governor Bryan said currently is outdated because people are ever-present no matter where they are because of instant messaging, video and cell phones.

"It is past time that our law reflects these technological advancements, and the current situation mandates that we adjust post haste," the Governor said.

Governor Bryan also will send a revision to the cannabis legislation to the Legislature, and he said that his Administration has gathered further public input about the proposed cannabis law and has addressed specific concerns of individual senators.

"As the economic disaster the last few weeks has affected GERS greatly, it is our hope that we can have a greater sense of exigency in implementing all the things that can help us regain solvency," the Governor said. "Once again, it is not the panacea, but certainly cutting the annuity of retirees by 30 percent cannot be the path either."

Governor Bryan also said he is transmitting a request to extend the current state of emergency executive order to July 12.

“Currently, the law only allows us to request a 30-day extension. We are asking the Legislature to consider 60 days due to the infrequency of hearings and the fact that we will most likely be in this state of emergency for the balance of the summer,” the Governor said.

Also Monday, Governor Bryan formally announced the Your Energy Stimulus (YES) program that will assist residents and businesses in paying their V.I. Water and Power Authority electricity bills with a $250 credit for active residential accounts and a $500 credit for active business accounts. The credit will be applied to and appear on the May power bill as YES Cares Act Credit, and it cannot be converted to cash. Unused portions of the YES Cares Act Credit will be applied to the following month’s bill.

The Governor also announced that the Virgin Islands Department of Labor has issued 1,595 unemployment checks totaling $1,110,365, and the department continues processing unemployment claims for residents.

Governor Bryan also announced that as of Monday morning, the federal Small Business Administration is again accepting applications from businesses in the U.S. Virgin for the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP), which offers businesses loans that will be forgiven if the company keeps all employees on the payroll for eight weeks and the money is used for rent, mortgage interest or utilities.

“To date, 240 Virgin Islands businesses have received more than $62 million under the PPP,” Governor Bryan said. “I want to encourage all small businesses to please take advantage of this program.”

Regarding the federal stimulus checks, the Governor expressed his frustration that the U.S. Treasury has failed to issue the policy to administer the funds to the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico, and he called on Delegate Stacey Plaskett to redouble her efforts in getting that money to the Territory.

“We are not second class citizens and are quite tired of being treated as such,” Governor Bryan said. “The latest conversations indicate the payments will be delayed until the end of May or June. This is unacceptable, and we will continue to work to get this money to our residents.”

The Governor closed by announcing that on Friday, May 1, with the guidance of Department of Health officials, he plans on broadening the scope of what business and recreation can be conducted safely.

“It’s going to be a while before we get through this, and we have to be trusting and brave in order to make it. This is totally uncharted water. No one has been here before, and we are adjusting to the virus and the myriad situations that it creates by the minute,” Governor Bryan said.

“We will continue to be vigilant and use all the information and resources we have to grow the economy, respect your personal freedom and, most importantly, keep you and your family safe,” he said.

The Governor’s next update on COVID-19 is tentatively scheduled for Wednesday.

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