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## **Governor Bryan Updates Residents on COVID-19**

U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS — During a press conference Wednesday to update residents on COVID-19, Governor Albert Bryan Jr. said his Administration received \$75 million from the federal CARES Act, which will allow for the Government of the Virgin Islands to provide a subsidy for V.I. Water and Power Authority ratepayers, assist the passenger ferry operators, which have cut back their passenger loads for social distancing, and to offer transportation assistance for disabled and elderly residents.

Governor Bryan also said he toured the Virgin Islands National Guard's Regional Training Institute in Estate Bethlehem on St. Croix, which is being adapted to serve as a quarantine facility for COVID-19 patients, and he said that he is instituting a "rent freeze" effective immediately.

"I want to caution the public that this pandemic is going to be with us for a while longer," the Governor said. "As we reopen the economy, and sooner or later, we're going to have to reopen the economy, it's not unreasonable that we will see surges that come and go as infections increase and decrease over time.

"The main concern is not to avoid the virus, because we know that's impossible, you cannot avoid this virus, but to be prepared to isolate any outbreaks and treat the affected patients with the best in medical care," he said.

To date, 688 individuals have been tested for COVID-19 in the Territory, with 583 of those testing negative, 54 testing positive and 51 tests still pending. Of those who tested positive, 48

have recovered, while three people have died, and the Virgin Islands Health Department currently is tracking three active cases of the virus.

Governor Bryan also talked about the Territory's readiness for the drawn-out and continued path the COVID-19 pandemic is expected to take in the coming months.

"There is the second wave that is discussed on a national level, and our strategy is to prepare for the pandemic management as a new way of life," the Governor said. "We are preparing for what comes next."

The Governor said Schneider Regional Medical Center on St. Thomas has completed the first phase of its COVID wing and now can accommodate an additional 20 acute care beds specifically designated for patients who are infected with the virus.

Governor Bryan also said that additional ventilators are on order and the Territory continues to build its stockpile of Personal Protective Equipment, including overalls, face-shields, 60,000 regular masks and 50,000 N-95 masks.

"This is one of the major pieces of us reopening our economy, to have more ventilators available in case of a surge, Governor Bryan said. "We are definitely better prepared now than we were 60 days ago."

Governor Bryan also said that the \$75 million federal assistance will go toward providing WAPA subsidies of \$250 for individuals and \$500 for businesses, which is known as the YES Program for Your Energy Stimulus.

The federal funds also will go toward the Territory's COVID Safe Transit Subsidy for the St. Thomas-St. John passenger ferries and also will be used to provide safe transport for the disabled and senior citizens.

"One of the things we did early on was try to get the ferries to limit the amount of people traveling to and from St. John," Governor Bryan said. "That, of course, had an economic result, so we're setting aside some funds now to give to both passenger ferry companies that take residents to and from St. Thomas and St. John."

Regarding the rent freeze, which will remain in effect for the duration of the state of emergency, landlords of tenanted apartments may not increase the rent, even if the lease has expired.

"I'm getting a lot of questions from people who are talking about their rent and getting eviction notices. I want to be clear, while we have an eviction freeze, the eviction process continues," Governor Bryan said. "If you're not paying your rent, your landlord can move for eviction and do everything necessary for eviction. They just can't put you out of the apartment until the end of

the state of emergency. So, we're urging you today to do your best to pay your rent or any rent payment programs that you may be a part of."

Governor Bryan said the state of emergency currently extends until May 12, but he is preparing legislation to send to the Senate to get authorization to extend the state of emergency to June 12.

The Governor also reiterated that there will be no hotel reservations allowed until at least May 15, although depending on what happens as the track of the COVID-19 virus continues, that moratorium on reservations could last into June.

"We're having the discussions now about getting the testings together so we can test every single person who touches our shores," Governor Bryan said. "People are ready to come back to the Virgin Islands. I'm getting calls from hotels and people want to come on vacation, they have weddings planned. We want to keep all our people safe. That's the primary thing. So, we're trying to get the testing to the point where we can allow them back."

During the press conference, Col. Dan Hibner of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers discussed details about the St. Croix quarantine facility in Estate Bethlehem.

Education Commissioner Racquel Berry-Benjamin also provided an update on the status of the Territory's public schools, including that the Board of Education has suspended its retention and promotion policies for the 2019-2020 school year to ensure that student achievement isn't negatively impacted.

Governor Bryan's next press conference on COVID-19 is tentatively scheduled for Friday, and beginning next week, the Governor will scale back his press conferences to two per week.

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