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Governor Bryan Says Reopening of Bars and Nightclubs Next Week Is Next Step in Relaxing Restrictions as Pandemic Continues

U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS — During the Government House weekly COVID-19 press briefing, Governor Albert Bryan Jr. said the reopening of the Territory's bars and nightclubs – which becomes effective on Monday, November, 9 – is the next step in relaxing existing restrictions and finding ways to move forward during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Education Commissioner Racquel Berry-Benjamin and Sports, Parks and Recreation Commissioner Calvert White also gave a briefing about a special collaboration between their respective agencies – as well as the Department of Health – to offer student athletes an opportunity to be considered for athletic scholarships as the Territory navigates the pandemic.

The commissioners have developed a “Student Sports Combine in a Bubble” as a free, safe and secure way to provide top student athletes with an opportunity to demonstrate their skills for recruiting, expectations and compliance for NCAA and NAIA institutions of higher learning. The “Combine in a Bubble” exhibition sessions will be videotaped as the athletes perform a variety of sports drills, trainings and scrimmage games, and the tapes will be shared with colleges, recruiters and scouts.

“We understand that it is necessary to find a way to live with the presence of this contagious and deadly virus,” Governor Bryan said. “Our COVID-19 Task Force had a really spirited conversation about the need to provide safe social outlets, especially for our young people. We have done so systematically for the churches, restaurants, movie theaters and casinos. We are now looking at sports and beginning to talk about night-time entertainment.”

Governor Bryan said he met with a delegation of bar and nightclub owners to talk about implementing an initial set of restrictions, and officials will monitor them to see if they are effective in containing the spread of the virus.

“As a reminder, the enforcement penalties established in Section 3 in the 15th Supplemental Executive Order issued on August 28 will continue in full effect,” the Governor said. “The fines include \$1,000 per attendee who violates the current mass gathering guidelines and \$5,000 per organizer of any such prohibited mass gathering event.”

The Governor also addressed the practice of having parties aboard boats rafted together, which is prohibited under the 12th Supplemental Executive Order and carries a penalty of a \$1,000 fine per incident or the confiscation of the vessel.

“I want you to know that it is just as easy to catch the virus during a mass gathering with people on a boat as it is on shore,” Governor Bryan said. “I want to discourage people from attending parties and other gatherings at sea. If you are going boating, which is permissible, you should still practice safe social distancing and wear a mask when it makes sense to do so.”

The Governor also reiterated the requirements and restrictions regarding travel, urging residents to avoid non-essential travel and reminding them that residents, in addition to tourists and other visitors, are required to submit testing results received within five days of returning to the USVI.

“Virgin Islanders traveling back and forth are also contacting and transporting the virus,” Governor Bryan said. “The testing requirement will be strictly enforced for all travelers age 5 and older. We have made it very simple to upload your results, just visit USVITravelPortal.com and fill out the form.”

The Governor ended the weekly press briefing by congratulating the more than 20,000 residents who voted during this election cycle, as well as the winners of Tuesday’s election who will be in the 34th Legislature and Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett, who heads into her fourth term in Congress.

Speaking to the future members of the 34th Legislature, Governor Bryan listed the unfinished business from the 33rd Legislature that still needs to be addressed:

- The merger of the Fire EMS service
- The expansion of the authorization for the cannabis industry to generate tax revenues
- Corporate and trust code amendments that will create a corporation as is enjoyed in Delaware
- Legislation creating a comprehensive approach to mental health and developmental disabilities

The Governor also said he plans to reintroduce a measure to refinance the Internal Revenue Matching Fund bonds to realize savings to benefit the Government Employees’ Retirement System.

He also said he will send down to the Legislature the first part of a three-part comprehensive land and water use plan for the USVI.

“There’s lots of critical and urgent work to be done. As the campaign politics subside, the administration of public policy must come front and center,” Governor Bryan said. “I look forward to working with each one of you to continue the advancement the Virgin Islands has been making.”

Unemployment

- To date, the Virgin Islands Department of Labor (VIDOL) has issued 44,761 unemployment insurance checks totaling more than \$34,786,878.
- The department also has issued an additional 28,008 Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation checks totaling \$43,177,200.
- VIDOL has issued 3,987 Pandemic Unemployment Assistance checks to self-employed Virgin Islanders totaling \$6,619,112 and \$2,059,801 in Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation.
- In total, the Bryan-Roach Administration has issued 77,907 checks totaling \$86,642,991.

Stimulus

The Bureau of Internal Revenue has extended the deadline to file a 2018 income tax return or form 1040 to receive a stimulus check to November 21. The Bureau will continue to make payments until December 31, 2020.

COVID-19 cases

- Currently tracking 36 active cases
- 24,776 individuals tested to date
- 23,358 of those tests were negative
- 1,388 tests came back positive
- 1,329 people have recovered
- 23 fatalities to date
- No COVID-19 patients are hospitalized at Juan F. Luis Hospital on St. Croix.
- Two COVID-19 patients are hospitalized at Schneider Regional Medical Center on St. Thomas.

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