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## **Governor Bryan Says Change in U.S. Senate Majority Raises Possibility of Larger Stimulus Payments**

U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS — During his weekly press briefing on Thursday, Governor Albert Bryan Jr. said the victories of Raphael Warnock and John Ossoff in the U.S. Senate runoff election in Georgia on Tuesday, which gave the Democrats a majority in both houses of Congress, significantly raises the possibility of Virgin Islanders receiving additional Stimulus payments to complement the \$600 already approved and signed into law by President Trump.

“With the new composition of the U.S. Senate, there is a likelihood that the \$2,000 stimulus proposal that was passed by the House of Representatives on December 29 and initially rejected by the outgoing Republican-led Senate will be brought back under the new Democratic Senate Majority,” Governor Bryan said. “If that passes, the U.S. Treasury Department will add the difference to the \$600 to those individuals in some states who already received the second stimulus.”

However, the Governor also explained that because the Territory uses a mirror tax system and has to wait for the U.S. Treasury to provide the funding before the Bureau of Internal Revenue and the Department of Finance can distribute the payments, Virgin Islanders may be delayed in receiving the funds.

“With that, we are currently in a holding pattern until Congress decides whether the second round of stimulus payments will remain at \$600 or will increase to \$2,000,” Governor Bryan said. “We are working with our federal partners to ensure it is the latter. And in such time as we receive the funding from Treasury, we will begin rolling out those stimulus payments to you.”

## **Vaccines**

Since the Department of Health executed its COVID-19 mass vaccination plan on December 16, the department has received 4,825 doses of the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines and has administered 1,571 of them to date, Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion said.

“In the last few days, we advanced our phase-based COVID-19 vaccination plan from 1A to 1B,” Commissioner Encarnacion said. “We continue to meet often with vaccinating providers to navigate challenges and to ensure that prioritized groups are the only people being vaccinated at this time.”

Per recommendations of the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices, Phase 1A includes clinical healthcare staff, residents and staff in long-term care facilities, persons in need of special care and staff in congregate living facilities (outside of nursing homes), patients on dialysis and the elderly throughout the territory.

Phase 1B comprises first responders, grocery store and pharmacy staff, persons with immunocompromised conditions, and specified frontline staff of select local and federal public and private agencies or entities that regularly engage with the public. The start of Phase 1B does not indicate the end of Phase 1A.

Commissioner Encarnacion stressed that the vaccines are fragile and must be stored and handled at certain temperatures and used quickly once ready. She said it is critical that persons in Phase 1A or 1B keep their vaccination appointments.

The Commissioner said there have been no reports of serious side effects from receiving the vaccine, and she said it is important that persons who are vaccinated sign up for VSAFE, an electronic tool that allows the Department of Health to collect and track data on any reactions that may occur.

“We expected some vaccine hesitancy for the initial rollout, but during the second week of vaccinations, we saw a tremendous increase in scheduling and acceptance of the vaccine. Many people have shown an interest in being vaccinated,” Commissioner Encarnacion said. “We have had zero reports of serious side effects from the vaccine, with one report of a very mild allergic reaction. We will continue to update you on any other side effects seen.”

The next vaccination phase is 1C and includes individuals who work in water and waste management, food services, shelters and housing, finance, information technology and communications, energy, legal, and media with a continuation of those not vaccinated in phases 1A and 1B.

“The overall vaccination process is fluid and changes depending on the allotment of vaccines sent to the territory as it becomes available nationally. The territory requests at least the minimum dose amount per vaccine – 975 for Pfizer and 1,900 for Moderna – which is sent weekly as ordered,” Commissioner Encarnacion said. “There are no exact dates for each phase to start and stop. We are in the planning phases for mass vaccination slated for the early Spring of 2021.”

For information about the vaccination plan or VSAFE, vaccination providers and persons who are eligible to schedule vaccinations, go to the Department of Health’s vaccination webpage at [covid19usvi.com/vaccines](https://covid19usvi.com/vaccines).

## **Unemployment**

The Governor said the recent Emergency Coronavirus Relief Act also extended Unemployment Insurance for those eligible under the CARES Act, which means the current programs being administered by the Virgin Islands Department of Labor were all automatically extended.

However, that legislation also created a new benefits program – the Mixed Earners Unemployment Compensation (MEUC) program – that provides an additional \$100 per week in benefits to individuals receiving certain unemployment insurance benefits who received at least \$5,000 of self-employment income in the most recent taxable year prior to the individual’s application for regular unemployment compensation.

The MEUC benefit is in addition to the reinstated Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation of \$300, and documentation of the individual’s income will be required to qualify. However, it is important to note that persons receiving Pandemic Unemployment Assistance will not be eligible for MEUC benefits.

VIDOL is currently preparing for the guidance from the U.S. Department of Labor in the form of the Unemployment Insurance Program Letters (UIPL) and will provide more information as it is received. Therefore, there can be no processing or payments made under the new programs signed by President Trump until this guidance is received and the funds are released from Treasury.

- As of January 7, the Virgin Islands Department of Labor (VIDOL) has issued 50,612 unemployment insurance checks totaling more than \$40,920,829.
- The department also has issued an additional 28,877 Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation checks totaling \$47,240,580.
- VIDOL has issued 6,522 Pandemic Unemployment Assistance checks to self-employed Virgin Islanders totaling \$10,753,06 and \$5,042,257 in Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation.
- Under the newly administered Lost Wages Assistance Program, VIDOL has issued 3,470 checks totaling \$2,931,838.
- Since April, the Bryan-Roach Administration has issued 92,890 checks totaling \$106,939,390 in unemployment benefits.

## **COVID-19 cases**

Governor Bryan said that 874 people have been tested for COVID-19 since Thursday, December 31. Of those tested during that period, 78 people tested positive.

“Our numbers are rising. This is due to all the holiday travel and the many gatherings held both legally and illegally,” the Governor said. “I can’t stress enough the need to follow the guidelines. We are enjoying some fortune now because many of us have been following the guidelines. But some of us are not.”

- Currently tracking 127 active cases
- 37,115 individuals tested to date (about 33% of the population)
- 34,936 of those tests were negative
- 2,106 tests came back positive
- 1,955 people tested since March have recovered
- 24 fatalities to date
- No COVID-19 patients are hospitalized at Juan F. Luis Hospital on St. Croix.

- No COVID-19 patients are hospitalized at Schneider Regional Medical Center on St. Thomas.

The Bryan/Roach Administration continues to be committed to transparency, stabilizing the economy, restoring trust in government, and ensuring the disaster recovery is completed as quickly as possible.

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