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Governor Bryan Addresses Spike in Territory's COVID-19 Cases, Securitization Senate Hearing at Weekly Press Briefing

Dr. Tai Hunte-Cesar presents facts and debunks misinformation about virus vaccines that are set to be released

U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS — During his weekly press briefing on Monday, Governor Albert Bryan Jr. spoke about the current spike in COVID-19 cases in the Territory, urging residents to scale back get-togethers during the holiday season and to continue their steadfast adherence to the Department of Health guidelines and restrictions regarding masks, social distancing and other precautions against the spread of the virus.

The Governor also said that further restrictions will have to be imposed in the next few weeks – including mandating 100% testing at the airports – to continue to be able to manage the pandemic.

“Individuals who come to the Territory without a negative test will be mandated to be tested at a personal cost,” Governor Bryan said. “Those who refuse to be tested will be fined and subject to a 14-day quarantine.”

The Governor said the fine that will be imposed will be significantly more than the cost of getting a COVID-19 test.

“The only delay to this being implemented is the availability of tests and testing, as well as the software changes needed for a smooth transition to this format,” Governor Bryan said. “We were successful in joining the new initiative by American Airlines to provide pre-boarding testing and will continue to pursue this with other airline partners.”

Additionally, Department of Health Medical Director Dr. Tai Hunte-Cesar talked about the soon-to-be-released COVID-19 vaccines and underscored the thorough vetting and testing the vaccines underwent, and she assured the community that the vaccines are safe to use and the best way to stop the spread of the virus around the world.

“The materials that are used to make vaccines are safe to be injected into our bodies because all vaccine ingredients are already existing in our bodies in much larger quantities,” Dr. Hunte-Cesar said. “Moreover, the risks of receiving a vaccination are exponentially lower than the risks of many other things that contribute to chronic diseases and cancer, such as the consumption of drugs, alcohol and unhealthy food and other self-imposed risky behavioral practices.”

Governor Bryan advised all residents to avoid any get-togethers or holiday gatherings and discouraged any non-essential travel.

“I know nine months is a long time and we are all exhausted and tired of hearing about the Coronavirus, but we cannot afford to become complacent. Virgin Islanders, I cannot stress enough how serious this is,” Governor Bryan said. “Most of our active cases present few symptoms or are asymptomatic, meaning you can’t see or sense who is infected with this virus. The best way to guard against it is to follow the guidelines and protect yourself and your loved ones.”

Debt-refinancing proposal

Before closing out his remarks to take questions from the media, the Governor also spoke at length about the Senate hearing on Tuesday, December 8, regarding Governor Bryan’s proposal to refinance the Government of the Virgin Islands debt for a lower interest rate, and he asked the 33rd Legislature to pass the proposal and put the resulting savings from the transaction toward the Government Employee’s Retirement System.

The Governor said he has spent the last three months having conversations with Virgin Islanders about the securitization proposal and has had the opportunity to answer questions and address concerns that residents had.

“In those conversations, what I have found is that Virgin Islanders are not against refinancing our debt. As a matter of fact, they agree that a 25% reduction on the interest we currently pay on our debt is a good idea and worth pursuing,” Governor Bryan said. “No one has come out to say that refinancing the entire debt is a bad thing. The only logical objection that is left is saying that taking that savings and using it to address critical government projects and obligations, one of which is the GERS, is a bad thing.”

Governor Bryan pointed out that the debt already exists and his Administration is not talking about borrowing any more with this proposal.

“If you do not want to give any money to the GERS, then say that, and vote to refinance the debt, save the money and lower our debt payment annually, but we cannot afford to lose this opportunity by simply doing nothing,” the Governor said.

Governor Bryan also stressed that the debt-refinancing proposal will avoid a 42% cut in benefits for retirees at the beginning of 2021 and the proposal is not a complete solution for GERS, but one of many initiatives, including collection of excise taxes; pursuing the gasoline excise taxes; development of internet gaming; taxation of adult-use of cannabis, expansion of the rum distillery industry and restructuring of the benefits plan for active and new government employees.

Income tax refunds

- The latest round of income tax refunds is just more than \$15 million and includes refunds for 2018.
- Of the \$15 million, \$5 million was distributed last week to 1,100 tax filers.
- Since taking office, the Bryan/Roach Administration has issued 37,700 refunds totaling \$112.9 million.
- In Fiscal Year 2020, the Administration issued 24,000 of those refunds totaling \$68 million.

Unemployment

- To date, the Virgin Islands Department of Labor (VIDOL) has issued 47,724 unemployment insurance checks totaling more than \$37,887,819.
- The department also has issued an additional 28,338 Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation checks totaling \$44,421,900.
- VIDOL has issued 5,111 Pandemic Unemployment Assistance checks to self-employed Virgin Islanders totaling \$8,366,074 and \$3,089,681 in Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation.
- In total, the Bryan-Roach Administration has issued 83,049 checks totaling \$93,765,474 since March.

COVID-19 cases

- 1,356 people were test for COVID-19 since Monday, November 30.
- Of those tested since November 30, 105 people tested positive (just above 7% positivity).
- Currently tracking 109 active cases
- 29,754 individuals tested to date (almost 30% of the population)
- 28,014 of those tests were negative
- 1,649 tests came back positive
- 1,517 people have recovered
- 23 fatalities to date
- No COVID-19 patients are hospitalized and on a ventilator at Juan F. Luis Hospital on St. Croix.
- One COVID-19 patient is hospitalized at Schneider Regional Medical Center on St. Thomas.

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