

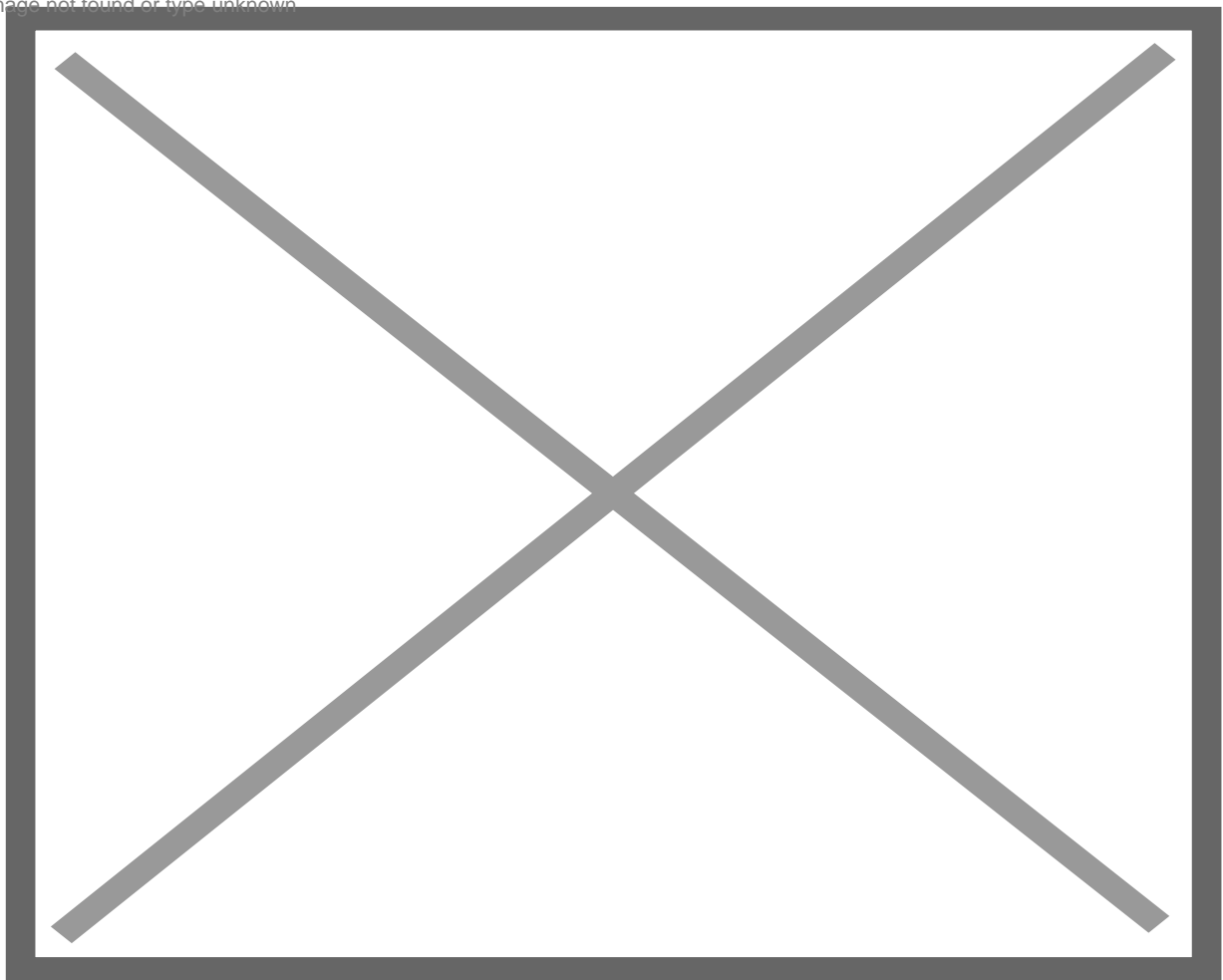
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Coronavirus Effect: Gov't Has 3-4 Days Cash on Hand, Apartment Evictions Halted, Retired Police Officers and Nurses Asked to Return to Workforce, Senate to Meet Friday for Bill Authorizing Bond for Gov't

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Robert Moore **March 23, 2020**

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Facing an escalation in the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases locally, the Virgin Islands government is asking retired doctors, nurses and police to come back to work to help with the territory's response to the potentially deadly coronavirus.

"We are making an earnest and heart-felt plea for all retired health care and retired law enforcement to come back to work to assist," Gov. Albert Bryan announced during Monday's coronavirus (COVID-19) update by Government House officials.

Opening the door to the former front-line health care and law enforcement workers to return to the job appears to be a move in anticipation of increasing demands on the territory's hospitals, clinics and public health providers. "We have not had any formal requests," Mr. Bryan said. But the COVID-19 crisis has prompted the governor and legislature to waive provisions of the law that limited these first-responders' ability to come back to work during territorial emergencies. "Previously, you (retirees) could work up to two years if you came back. That is waived so that you can come back, still receive your retirement and a salary for your services."

The V.I. Department of Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion said that as of Monday afternoon, there were still 17 confirmed cases of the COVID-19 disease in the territory, with nine cases on St. Croix and eight on St. Thomas. No confirmed cases have been identified on St. John, she said. None of those people are hospitalized.

Since January, the health department has sent nasal swabs from 74 "persons under investigation" or people suspected of having been infected by the coronavirus to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) for laboratory testing. Fifty-five people tested negative to having the coronavirus. The VIDOH is awaiting results of two tests.

The health department is following the testing guidelines set by the CDC: samples are collected for testing when a person displays the signs of COVID-19 infection: fever and persistent, dry cough combined with travel to high-risk areas. Widespread testing of those who do not have symptoms is unlikely in the immediate future.

Health Commissioner: Hospitals Have Sufficient Capacity for Seriously Ill, For Now

Schneider Regional Medical Center and Juan Luis Hospital each has seven ventilator machines for patients with acute respiratory illnesses. Each hospital also has access to 40 "one-time use" ventilators, and an additional 80 are expected to arrive in May, Gov. Bryan said.

Ms. Encarnacion said the ventilators are for use with patients who are critically ill with respiratory problems. "Depending on the level of acuity, both hospitals have the capacity to care for many more than the seven or 14 vents. The emergency rooms of both locations and the units are being prepared right now" should an influx of COVID-19 patients arrive.

The Senate to Meet in Emergency Session on Friday

Senate President Novelle Francis said the Senate has been working closely with the executive branch and Congresswoman Stacey Plaskett. The legislature has been meeting by teleconference, and will have an emergency session on Friday, March 27th, to act on legislation to allow the government to issue a revenue anticipation bond. This would raise working capital "... thereby reducing financial stress," Mr. Francis said. "We are exploring ways this [emergency session] can be done safely without creating additional exposure for our staff."

Mr. Bryan said the government has three to four days of cash on-hand. "We are still collecting revenue from sources. We have an ongoing conversation with the legislature in order to supplement revenues for this year."

"We anticipate in getting serious around mid-April. That is why we are working the legislature to get this line of credit (revenue anticipation note)," he said.

"The health impact of this is going to be disastrous globally," Mr. Bryan said. "The economic impact is going to last for years to come, so we have to be prepared for that."

The territory appealed last week to the U.S. Small Business Administration for a disaster declaration. That declaration was granted Monday, providing local small business access to SBA economic injury disaster loans, Mr. Bryan said. “This is a first step in response to the economic hardships.”

Suspension of Provisions of Landlord-Tenant Law

Provisions of the VI Code Title 28, Chapter 13, Section 281 dealing with landlord-tenant issues have been temporarily suspended in the government’s effort to prevent people from losing their apartment homes due to job loss over coronavirus shutdowns. “Landlords cannot evict tenants during this period of emergency,” Mr. Bryan said.

Retirees Can Rejoin the Workforce to Fight COVID-19

The government has also suspended laws that made it difficult for government retirees participating in the Government Employee Retirement System to rejoin the workforce. Gov. Bryan said retirees currently receiving a retirement annuity can re-enter the workforce in a position supporting the COVID-19 preparedness response, provided they are working on a contractual or appointment basis. Those retirees will continue to receive their annuity payments while drawing a salary for COVID-19 related work.

For more information, retirees can contact the Department of Personnel at (340) 774-8588 or (340) 718-8588. Or email the department at gviermegencyresume@dop.vi.gov

Businesses Should Contact DOL Before Laying Off Employees

Labor Commissioner Gary Malloy urged business owners to contact the Department of Labor before laying off employees so that the department know how many unemployment compensation requests to expect. “We are trying to avoid the volume of crowds coming to the agency,” Mr. Malloy said.

The commissioner said there have been 350 new applications for unemployment compensation since March 20th. Most of the applications came from the St. Thomas/ St. John district, he said.

Unemployment compensation applications can be found on the department’s website. They must be filled out and delivered to the St. Thomas or St. Croix DOL offices, in person, because the applicant must provide personal information that cannot, at this point, be supplied online or by mail, Mr. Malloy said.