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Installation of Cameras Territory-Wide, Shot Spotter, Will Help Blunt Crime, Bryan Says; Governor Throws Weight Behind Creation of Office of Gun Violence Prevention

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Governor Albert Bryan addressed the crime issue in the U.S. Virgin Islands during his Thursday coronavirus press briefing, and was emphatic in separating the current violence from the Covid-19 pandemic, stating that the violent activity has been a longstanding problem.

"I wish I could say that all the violence is attributable to high levels of unemployment in our community and the desperation related to folks struggling to feed their families. At least then we would know how to focus our resources towards a real solution. But that is far from the truth. Even as we experienced unprecedented levels of job growth and employment on the island of St.

Croix this past year, violent crime continued almost unabated," Mr. Bryan said.

He called on the community to support the effort of reducing crime by relaying to trusted organizations information that may lead to the arrest of perpetrators. He also called on residents to become law enforcement officers. The V.I.P.D. has long struggled with a manpower shortage. According to Senator Novelle Francis, speaking to the Consortium Friday morning, the V.I.P.D.'s manpower is 33 percent less than when he led the police force back in 2010 — and even then, he said, the force was understaffed.

Relative to his administration's work to blunt the crime problem, the governor spoke of three initiatives, two of which are underway, with the third waiting on legislative action.

The first is the installation of cameras territory-wide which Mr. Bryan said will be activated later this year. The governor did not give a timeframe, but said that funding was already in place and that his administration was looking to expand the financial resources available. According to Sen. Francis, \$1 million — \$500,000 per district — has been sitting in the Public Finance Authority for a territory-wide camera system since 2014.

The administration is also working on bringing back online the shot spotter system, which Governor Bryan said was damaged by Hurricanes Irma and Maria. The system is from a company of the same name, ShotSpotter, whose sophisticated technology detects where gunshots emanate from.

Police Commissioner Trevor Velinor, who was also at the briefing, said the V.I.P.D. had set aside funding for the reinstallation of the shot spotter system. "We're good to go. In fact we have a kickoff coming out relatively soon. Within the next week or so, we're going to be meeting with ShotSpotter, and we anticipate that the system is going to be in the territory, live, mid-summer," Mr. Velinor said.

Additionally, Mr. Bryan said he's throwing the weight of his administration behind a Senator Myron Jackson-sponsored measure that would establish the Office of Gun Violence Prevention. The program is a community-based action with the end goal of disrupting the cycle of homicides in the community. The bill is going through the legislative process.

"This is not an approach of law enforcement. It is a community-based approach where individuals will be going into neighborhoods like Grove, Mutual Homes, Bovoni, Savan, Hospital Ground — with a mission to disrupt the violence before it flares up in the streets," Mr. Bryan said.

He added, "It's not a panacea, it's not a total and final solution, but it is the kind of community engagement that we have not effectively utilized in the past."

A federal technical assistance grant will fund the needs assessment portion of the program, said the governor. The idea is to assess the problems in neighborhoods before determining actions to cure.

So far 20 people have died through homicides in the U.S. Virgin Island in 2020 (12, St. Thomas, 7 St. Croix and one on St. John), according to the most recent numbers provided by the V.I.P.D. on April 27, along with four additional homicide deaths recorded since that time — three of which were on St. Thomas and one on St. Croix.

