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Local Consultant Calls For Data-Driven Support Services to Promote Economic Competitiveness

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Ashley Scotland

One local entrepreneur is warning fellow Virgin Islanders that they must be ready to compete with talent from around the world in an economy that is becoming increasingly globalized. Ashley Scotland, founder of Triple A Strategic Solutions, was part of the 2023 Governor’s Workforce Development Summit, speaking on a panel that discussed “Community at the Core: Inclusive Growth and Sustainability.”

“We have to make sure that our people are prepared for this,” Mr. Scotland said. The mandate for ensuring this preparedness rests with both public and private sector agencies. He urged them to adopt a data-first approach, and then to subsequently meet members of the community that they

serve, to assess whether the work done would have “long-lasting impact.” While acknowledging that many residents benefit from government services like affordable housing and assistance from the Department of Human Services, Mr. Scotland insisted that more needs to be done.

There should be a push towards taking job fairs into vulnerable communities, he said, along with providing counseling services in neighborhoods regularly marred by crime, and providing more affordable childcare options where necessary. Acknowledging a previous panel’s exploration of [new and exciting opportunities](#) anticipated to come to the territory, Mr. Scotland advised that a community’s basic needs must be met before “we can layer on these other opportunities.” While jobs in new sectors, and jobs with new, more relaxed work requirements are becoming ever more available, Mr. Scotland believes it may be hard for some Virgin Islanders to access these opportunities if they are still focused on meeting their basic needs.

“The conversations need to be driven towards moving people from being vulnerable, and we need to use data to recognize what programs work,” surmised Mr. Scotland. While Governor Albert Bryan Jr. expressed intentions for the Virgin Islands to remain competitive, another panelist observed that the territory is often viewed as picking grounds for cheap, remote labor. Christopher Laney, the labor economist and director of government affairs and workforce strategy for Lightcast, said “in areas like Information, the average wage here in the Virgin Islands is \$80,000. In the [United] States, it’s \$140,000. So you have businesses in the States saying that I can get cheaper labor in the Virgin Islands.” He recommended figuring out ways to ensure compensation in the territory be made equivalent to what exists in the USA, which will consequently drive economic development in the territory.

Meanwhile, Emmanuela Perez-Cassius, assistant director of resident wellness and empowerment at the Virgin Islands Housing Authority, said that marginalized populations in the territory may view access to varying opportunities as complicated. “I don’t think people care if you care for them. I think people care how [they] could get in,” said Ms. Perez-Cassius. Virgin Islanders, she noted, “don’t like handouts. We love to be able to say we did it for ourselves.” Notwithstanding, Stephanie Chalana Brown, state director of the Division of Virgin Islands Cultural Education encouraged education and access to information within vulnerable communities to inform residents of the pathways that do exist.

Mr. Scotland, returning the conversation to his initial point, told panelists that his remarks do not solely relate to labor and education, but encouraged agencies to “look at the whole ecosystem [including] things you don’t think impact the vulnerable populations, like paying small business contractors or figuring out ways [of] how we can increase access to capital for them, helps grow our economy and helps create pathways for meaningful success for people in our vulnerable communities.”

Notwithstanding the challenges, there is hope for Virgin Islanders who choose to apply themselves,, said Ms. Perez-Cassius, assuring residents that “you have access to whatever it is you want, whether it’s a better education, a better way of life, more capital, more capacity, [or] bigger homes.”