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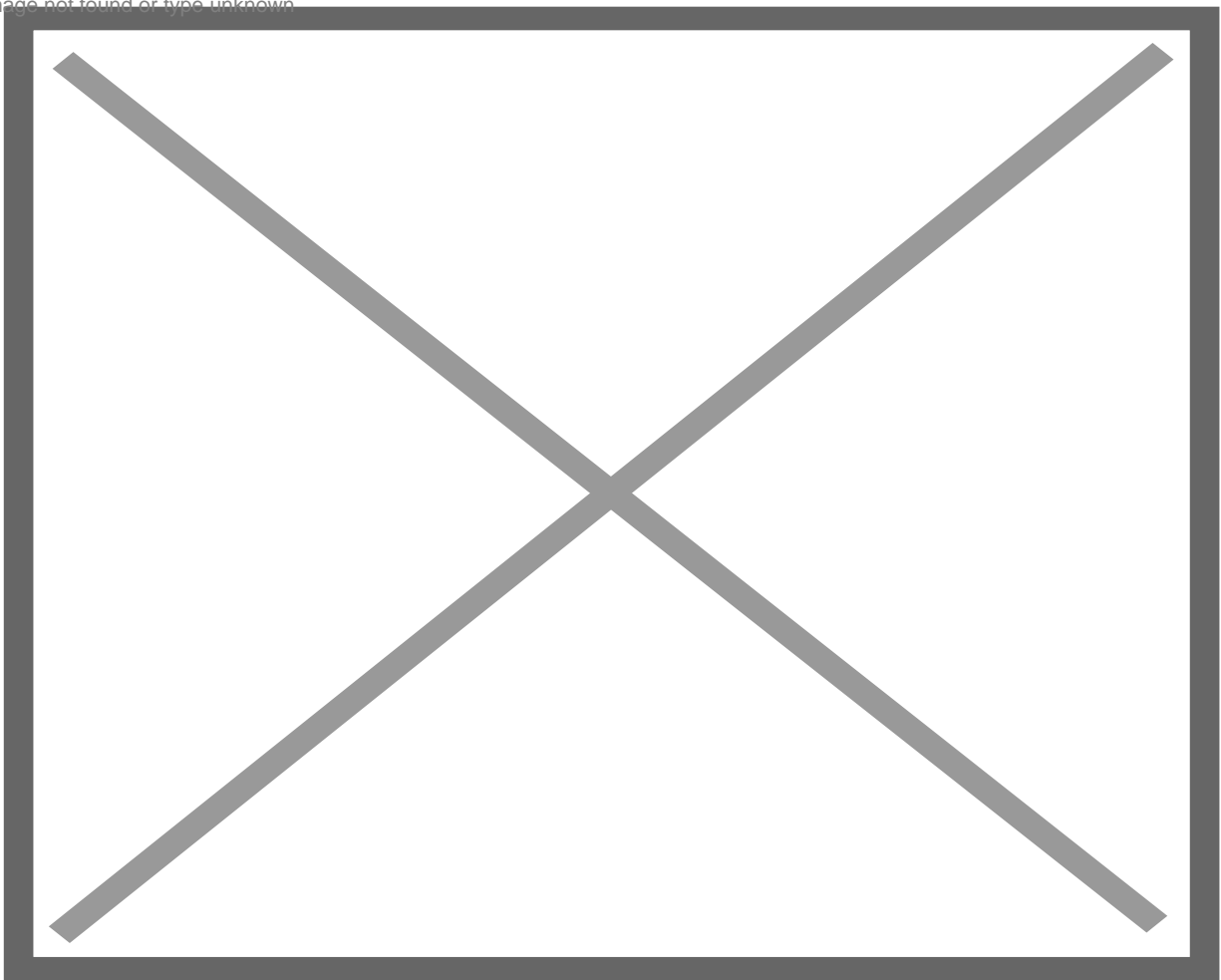
Bryan Calls on Virgin Islanders to Return Home, But High Energy Costs, Health Care Gaps, and School Woes are Stumbling Blocks

Officials identify key obstacles deterring skilled diaspora from contributing to territory's rebuilding

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USVI diaspora in New York in 2019. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

Skilled members of the Virgin Islands diaspora are being challenged to return home to contribute to the territory's development and rebuilding efforts: Two calls, from two officials, on two consecutive days underscored the need the territory has for skilled labor with which to execute its development goals.

On Wednesday, during the ribbon-cutting ceremony for the new WIC building in the Department of Health's Knud Hansen Complex, Governor Albert Bryan Jr. spoke about human resource-related difficulties being faced as the Virgin Islands rebuilds post-hurricane. "We had a mass migration after the storms so we don't have a lot of people," he observed, noting that the island is now suffering a dearth of talent. Saying that some of the émigrés are now critical of the recovery efforts, the governor offered some pointed remarks. "If you were here it'd be a lot easier," he noted. "Yeah, I'm talking to you," he clarified, speaking directly to diasporan Virgin Islanders.

The next day, during a Senate hearing of the Committee on Education and Workforce Development, an official from the University of the Virgin Islands Research and Technology Park (RT Park) echoed similar, albeit less sharp, sentiments.

Alfonso Rodriguez Jr., senior entrepreneurship manager at UVI RT Park, focused his discussion on the several significant barriers prospective returning residents may face. He noted that a "Come Home USVI" campaign, begun last November through the Virgin Islands STEM Talent Archive (VISTA+), had held three networking events which attracted a total of 236 attendees to venues in Houston, Atlanta, and Washington D.C. At these events, Mr. Rodriguez said Virgin Islanders in the diaspora were able to have "open and honest conversations" about returning to the territory. "We aim to provide a realistic and transparent perspective on the relocation process," he told lawmakers. Those conversations included frank discussion on the availability of affordable housing, as well as the cost of energy.

These two factors are really serving to dampen the enthusiasm of prospective returning residents, officials found. "The high cost and reliability of energy in the Virgin Islands stands out as a significant barrier to attracting the diaspora back to the territory," Mr. Rodriguez said. This inhibited not just those who were seeking to come back home to work, but also those "who seek to relocate businesses and other community-impacting opportunities," he noted. He urged legislators to work with "relevant stakeholders to explore sustainable solutions that can alleviate the economic strain and enhance the reliability of these vital utilities."

The territory will also need to work on improving access to affordable, high-quality healthcare, Mr. Rodriguez said. "Addressing gaps in health care infrastructure and ensuring the accessibility of medical facilities contribute to making the Virgin Islands a more attractive destination for potential returnees."

While the immense post-hurricane construction needs of the territory have been touted as an economic engine to drive growth, members of the diaspora may not be interested in labor intensive jobs. Mr. Rodriguez recommends "fostering an environment that encourages the establishment and growth of industries that require specialized skills." Not only would this help attract returning talent, but would boost the territory's economy overall, he argued.

Challenges within the public school system are another deterrent, Mr. Rodriguez said.

However, despite the barriers in the way of seeing an influx of Virgin Islanders coming back home to live and work, Mr. Rodriguez remains optimistic. The efforts of RT Park and its partners, he says, will continue to be focused on recognizing those barriers and implementing "innovative solutions that will enhance the overall appeal and viability of returning home to the Virgin Islands."