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Bryan Calls for Minimum Wage Increase as Inflation Squeezes Virgin Islanders

After discussing economic pressures with the Consortium's Ernice Gilbert, Governor Bryan calls on the Legislature to raise the minimum wage, stressing the urgency of providing relief to struggling families

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Governor Albert Bryan Jr. By. GOV'T HOUSE

Governor Bryan is calling on the 35th Legislature to consider new legislation that would raise the minimum wage in the Virgin Islands, stating that with inflation steadily rising, the current rate of \$10.50 per hour is insufficient to meet the growing financial demands faced by residents.

Mr. Bryan's appeal for legislative action follows an interview on Wednesday with V.I. Consortium founder and publisher Ernice Gilbert, during which he faced questions about the high cost of

living that has driven many Virgin Islanders to relocate to the mainland United States. In response, the governor said the economic reality was also difficult in the states, a response that elicited disapproving comments from community members, and a sentiment that Mr. Bryan had failed to relate to the plight of the people he leads.

"I don't think that sentiment is any different on mainland USA," Governor Bryan remarked, referencing a news report where two white, college-educated individuals described the financial hardships they were enduring. "One thing that I have to say is that it's always been hard, you know?" the governor added, emphasizing that economic challenges are not unique to the Virgin Islands.

However, in a press release issued on Friday night, Governor Bryan struck a more conciliatory tone, acknowledging the hardships faced by Virgin Islanders. "Our people are struggling to keep up with the cost of living," he said. "They work hard every day to support their families, to put food on the table, and to provide for their children's futures. But at \$10.50 an hour, too many of our residents are falling behind. In these challenging economic times, we must ensure that our minimum wage is fair and sustainable."

The governor's call for a minimum wage increase comes as inflation continues to drive up the cost of essential goods and services, such as food and housing. During his interview with Gilbert, Governor Bryan highlighted the steps his administration has taken to mitigate the financial pressures facing Virgin Islanders.



V.I. Consortium founder and publisher, Ernice Gilbert (right), interviewed Governor Albert Bryan Jr. on Wed. Aug. 28, 2024 at Gov't House on St. Croix. (Credit: Gov't House)

"Raising the minimum wage isn't just about numbers on a paycheck," Governor Bryan stated. "It's about dignity, fairness, and giving our people the opportunity to thrive, not just survive. It's about ensuring that no one who works full-time in the Virgin Islands is forced to live in poverty."

In addition to pushing for a wage increase, Governor Bryan highlighted several initiatives his administration has implemented to ease the economic burden on residents. One of the most significant measures has been the allocation of millions in subsidies to the Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority (WAPA), which has helped maintain energy costs at 43 cents per kilowatt hour. This intervention, combined with \$100 million from the American Rescue Plan Act to subsidize energy production, has resulted in a \$2,000 savings for each Virgin Islands household

with an active WAPA meter.

Governor Bryan also emphasized his administration's commitment to long-term success and stability for Virgin Islands families. Efforts include providing free Pre-K through 12 education, free college tuition at the University of the Virgin Islands, and free technical training, all aimed at equipping residents with the skills necessary to succeed in a competitive world.

Affordable homeownership has also been a priority for the Bryan-Roach Administration. Through the VI Slice Moderate-Income Homeownership Program, eligible families can receive up to \$200,000 in grant funding towards the purchase of their first home. This program, the governor said, is part of a broader mission to help Virgin Islanders build generational wealth and secure a prosperous future.

Governor Bryan also pointed to his administration's efforts to resolve long-standing financial obligations, even amid limited resources. "We've fought hard to restore \$41 million to Virgin Islands Government employees who endured an eight percent pay cut in 2011. We've returned over \$348 million in income tax refunds and more than \$43 million in retroactive wages owed since 1990. These are real, tangible benefits that have helped ease the burden on our people," he said.

In his press release, Governor Bryan made it clear that the Virgin Islands cannot afford to wait any longer to address the issue of minimum wage. As inflation continues to rise, so too must the minimum wage to ensure economic stability for residents. He urged the Legislature to act quickly to ensure that the minimum wage in the territory reflects the true cost of living.

"Every day that we delay, more families struggle to make ends meet," Governor Bryan stated. "It's time for our leaders to step up and ensure that every Virgin Islander has the opportunity to build a better future."

The governor concluded by expressing his commitment to working with the Legislature to bring much-needed relief to the hardworking people of the Virgin Islands. "Together, we can make this happen," he said. "Let's give our people the fair shot they deserve."