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Gov. Bryan Declares State of Emergency, Cancels St. Patrick's Day Parade, Says Carnival 'Will Most Likely' Be Canceled in Response to Coronavirus Pandemic

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Ernice Gilbert and Robert Moore **March 13, 2020**

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St. Patrick's Day 2017 picture. By. Ernice GILBERT/ VI CONSORTIUM

Governor Albert Bryan declared a state of emergency in preparation of the likely spread of coronavirus (COVID-19) in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

As a result, Mr. Bryan said he was placing a moratorium on permits for mass gatherings “for the foreseeable future ... We have determined that it is best for the safety of our residents,” he said.

The St. Patrick’s Day Parade slated for Saturday on St. Croix has been canceled.

Yet despite stern warning to avoid at all costs large crowds and gatherings, Mr. Bryan has not yet made a decision about the fate of the largest “mass gathering” event in the territory — Carnival VI St. Thomas, scheduled to begin in April. “We haven’t made a decision on Carnival as yet,” he said. “We want to see what happens this week. ... What we want to make sure is that as a government we are not facilitating the mass gatherings of people.”

"I can tell right now, how we're projecting, more than likely carnival will be will be canceled," the governor further stated.

When pressed on why he wasn't prepared to cancel carnival even as he dissuaded mass gatherings, the governor said, "If you don't want to go to Carnival, you know, you have the ability not to go. You do not need me to cancel it for you not to go. But we'll definitely be looking at that as things progress."

Meanwhile, nine suspected case — called “Persons Under Investigation” — have been tested for COVID-19. Three have tested negative. The results for six more people are outstanding. The expectations are, however, that cases in the territory will surface. "Many people at some point, this year or next year, will be exposed to the virus," Governor Bryan said.

Mr. Bryan said his administration was looking at eventually closing schools and utilizing remote learning, but said there would be issues with implementation, as some students lack internet access and computers. On the Dept. of Education's part, the governor said D.O.E. had contacted a company to aid with the implementation of remote learning.

The Department of Health said the territory will soon have the ability to perform 1,000 tests and that its lab on St. Croix has been approved to facilitate these tests. The department is also in talks with other local as well as national labs to conduct tests.

D.O.H. Commissioner Justa Encarnacion said the department's top priority at this time is surveillance, contact tracing, quarantine and containment and mitigation efforts to protect those most vulnerable — the elderly and immune-compromised. To contact the department for help, call 340-712-6299, or 340-776-1519.

With seniors being at higher risk of dying from the coronavirus, Dept. of Human Services Commissioner Kimberly Causey-Gomez announced a number of measures to mitigate the disease's potential impact. She announced the closure of the department's senior centers in Richmond on St. Croix, the Knud Hansen Complex in St. Thomas and the facility in Cruz Bay St. John. Ms. Causey-Gomez said a D.H.S. team will ensure daily communication with each client at the centers, and will deliver meals.

The Queen Louise Home for the Aged in St. Thomas, and the Herbert Grigg Home For The Aged on St. Croix will cease all visitation by groups, family, friends, clergy and others, Ms. Causey-Gomez said. She said a meeting will be held next week in both districts to answer any questions family members may have regarding COVID-19 and how it impacts their relatives at the D.H.S. facilities. The commissioner added that the department has been working on alternative ways for relatives to stay in contact with their loved ones.

Additionally, the distribution of senior ID cards in both districts have been temporarily halted, the commissioner said.

Headstarts will remain open at this time. "We are strongly encouraging staff as well as parents who are ill to stay home to prevent the spread of germs," the commissioner said.

If you are 60 years or older and living alone, or disabled and in need of assistance at this moment of crisis, D.H.S. is urging you to call 340-774-0930 ext. 4018 in St. Thomas. On St. Croix, call 340-773-6630 and 340-776-6334 in St. John.

The governor, in closing, spoke emotionally about the economic impact the territory will sustain as a result of the coronavirus pandemic.

"The economic impact of this on our community is going to be long-felt and it's going to be hard. Right away, the president is looking to delay the April 15th deadline [to file taxes]. That immediately affects the cash-flow to the Virgin Islands Government. The cruise ships have stopped coming, which affects our tourism dollars. Flights are down; so far we've been holding steady on hotel reservations. But this is of grave concern to a tourism economy like ours. There's no indication at this point how long this is going to last, so we're doing things on the government side now to reduce spending and look at a conservative approach moving forward, because we have some very rough days ahead — not only health-wise, but economically.

"How we're going to do the things that we are obligated to do by our budget and how do we get those revenues in. How do we make sure that all these people who are going to have to work overtime to handle the situation in our community remain paid. How do all those people in the private sector who are working for businesses that have been impacted heavily by the downturn in tourism make out. Those are conversations we are having all the time. We assure the public that we are looking into every which way to find relief for our territory moving forward," Mr. Bryan said.