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Coronavirus Effect: 1,000 File Unemployment Claims in St. Thomas; State of Emergency Extended; Bryan Sees 'Treacherous' Financial Road Ahead; Online Unemployment Filing Announced

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Recently laid off St. Thomians file unemployment claims at the Dept. of Labor last week.
By. ERNICE GILBERT/VI CONSORTIUM

The state of emergency and territory-wide stay-at-home order will be extended for another 30 days — until at least April 30th — Gov. Albert Bryan said on Monday.

Further cracking down on social interaction among Virgin Islanders, Mr. Bryan extended the non-essential business shutdown to include closure of all food and entertainment venues that operate

on beaches, to include any beachside restaurants, bars and food trucks. “We have seen quite a curtailed amount of beach activity, but there are still establishments that operate on the beach and cause people to congregate,” the governor said. “Those are closed, effectively immediately.”

Over the last 48 hours, the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases rose to 30 people as of Monday afternoon, up from 19 two days earlier. A total of 190 people have been tested for the fast-spreading virus, with 123 tests coming back negative, 30 positives and results for 24 still out. Of those who tested positive, Mr. Bryan said 19 have recovered. It was immediately unclear whether “recovered” meant they were retested and are now negative or whether those individuals are considered recovered because they no longer show symptoms.

The number will rise dramatically in the coming days and weeks, as the VI Department of Health was expected to begin local testing for the coronavirus. The department will have the capacity to test 30 people per day, and within a few weeks, will be able to test up to 1,000 suspected cases daily. Based on the VIDOH projections, over 100 infected patients could be hospitalized with the virus, Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion said recently.

Under the government’s stay-at-home order, residents are advised to leave home only for essential tasks because the coronavirus spreads easily through close contact with others. When an infected person coughs or sneezes, respiratory droplets are cast through the air, potentially transmitting the virus to those up to six feet away.

Not everyone is listening to public health recommendations, and by going against guidelines are risking their own health and the safety of others. “For the most part we have done good,” Mr. Bryan said. “But we still have some in our community who are not taking this seriously. If you have any doubt about the seriousness of what we are dealing with, just tune into any one of your favorite news channels and see the bodies being loaded into trailers. Maybe you will have a change in attitude.”

Bryan: ‘If We Catch You, We Will Shut You Down’

A tour of St. Croix and St. Thomas finds roads with far less traffic than normal. That, however, is deceptive. “We are still noticing the congregation of people outside of some convenience stores and gas stations. ... Any establishment found in violation of this statute will be subject to closure until April 30th and, or, permanent revocation of said business license. This is not a joke. We are taking this very seriously. We are wasting valuable resources sending officers out there to curtail this type of activity. If we catch you, we are going to shut you down.”

Three VI businesses have already been closed temporarily for allowing groups of people to gather inside or outside of their establishments, Mr. Bryan said last week. He would not disclose the business names or locations. “I cannot stress enough how serious a situation this is,” the governor said, adding that public health experts have projected between 100,000 and 200,000 people could die from COVID-19 in the U.S. and millions more will be infected with the virus. “We have been fortunate, but we have to be vigilante — don’t be lulled into a false sense of security that we are or will be exempt from this virus. We will not be exempted from this count. We will not be exempted from the perils of this virus.”

\$40 Million to \$50 Million in Direct Payments to Virgin Islanders

Between \$40 million and \$50 million in direct payments of coronavirus stimulus money will be made available to distribute to individual Virgin Islanders and families, Mr. Bryan said during Monday’s coronavirus response update. “But this will not be enough. We have a long and

treacherous road ahead.”

A sweeping \$2 billion federal coronavirus stimulus package enacted last week includes direct payments to most Americans, including Virgin Islanders, as well as an expansion of unemployment insurance and small business loans. Mr. Bryan said the administration is preparing to distribute the federal stimulus funds as soon as they become available from the treasury. Under the territory’s tax scheme in which residents pay income taxes to the Bureau of Internal Revenue instead of the federal Internal Revenue Service, the local government will administer the direct payments. The federal treasury will then reimburse the territory.

Mr. Bryan said the administration is attempting to get the federal government to dole out the money directly to Virgin Islanders rather than reimbursing the territory. If that attempt fails, the territory would have to take a short-term bank loan of \$40 million to \$50 million. The federal reimbursement would pay off the loan, he said.

Unemployment Compensations Applications Available Online

As of April 1st, applications for unemployment insurance must be submitted online at the Department of Labor’s website, www.vidol.gov, said labor commissioner Gary Molloy. Applications will no longer be taken at the labor department offices on St. Croix or St. Thomas. There will be drop-off boxes at the labor offices in St. Croix and St. Thomas. Workers compensation documents will be available at boxes at the labor offices.

“The claims will be accepted electronically by using our website. www.vidol.gov. The application can be submitted from a computer or a mobile phone,” Mr. Molloy said. “If you have already submitted an application you do not need to do it online.”

To submit an online application, you must register first, the commissioner said. To register, go to www.vidolviews.org. For more information contact the labor department at 340-773-1994 on St. Croix and 340-776-2700 on St. Thomas.

During the week ending March 27th, more than 1,000 applied for unemployment benefits, Mr. Molloy said. Most new applications were from St. Thomas, but “St. Croix is ramping up,” he said.

Fiscal Outlook

Gov. Bryan said the government should have no problem making payroll. Concerns about the revenue stream will grow more serious by mid-summer, he said.