

The Virgin Islands Consortium

V.I. Beaches Could Reopen Next Week, Bryan Says; Lack of Supplies Hindering Coronavirus Testing Frequency in Territory

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Virgin Islands beaches could reopen to the public as early as next week, Gov. Albert Bryan announced during the regularly Monday coronavirus update from Government House on St. Croix.

“The closure of the public beaches will remain in effect for one more week, at which point we will make an assessment to determine whether an extension of this order will be necessary,” Mr. Bryan said. The governor ordered the jewels of the territory closed to beachgoers a week ago, after multiple social media postings of crowds partying on public

beaches in defiance of the government's ban on mass gatherings of 10 or more people.

The decision to close beaches as a means of stemming the spread of the highly contagious coronavirus brought on a wave of second-guessing about timing and necessity to pause beach activities for everyone. "So far, most people have been cooperating," Mr. Bryan said. "But unlike the predictability of hurricanes, when it comes to this public health crisis, worldwide, no one knows if we are at the beginning of the hurricane, the tail of the storm or the eye of the storm. One thing that we know for sure is that we are in the storm."

As of Monday afternoon, the number of positive COVID-19 cases remained at 51. That is unchanged since Saturday. There are 322 negative test results of the total 375 tests administered. One person — an 85-year-old man from St. Thomas — has died. Results from tests are pending, Mr. Bryan said. There are no hospitalized cases related to COVID-19 at St. Croix's Juan F. Luis Hospital. Two people are hospitalized at the Schneider Regional Medical Center. One patient is in stable condition and the second is on a ventilator machine to assist with breathing, the governor said.

COVID-19 Test Supplies is a Challenge

The two-day leveling off of new COVID-19 cases in the territory may be a function of the recent fluctuation in testing. For example, between Sunday (April 5) to Thursday (April 9), the Department of Health administered tests to 85 persons under investigation for being infected by COVID-19. Between Friday (April 10) to Monday (April 13), seven tests were administered.

Dr. Brett Ellis, director of the Department of Health's public health laboratory, said the territory's testing facilities and epidemiology staff well-prepared and capable of handling a large surge in testing. But obtaining sufficient testing supplies is a challenge in the Virgin Islands and across the U.S., Dr. Ellis said. "We expect that to continue to be a challenge into the coming weeks as manufacturers work on their production capacity and the federal government determines how to allocate those tests as they become available."

The main issue with testing supplies in the territory and around the country is with the chemicals — called reagents in science and medical circles. During a global pandemic the supply chain is inadequate to meet the worldwide demand for the reagents.

The VIDOH last week received lab instruments to perform "extremely rapid testing." Positive test results can be obtained within three minutes," Dr. Ellis said. "Negative take within 15 minutes." The rapid testing equipment is being handed off to the the Juan F. Luis Hospital and Schneider Regional Medical Center for use. The instruments were delivered with 120 tests. "As such we will have to prioritize or limit the testing that is performed. Hospitalized patients and medical personnel who are symptomatic of COVID-19 infection are high on the priority list."

"We are hoping that the supply chain improves, and that we will be able to do more and more testing here," Dr. Ellis said.

