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Territory's U.S. Attorney's Office, IRS Criminal Investigation Unit, B.I.R. and Others Warn Taxpayers to be on Alert for Scams Related to Coronavirus Economic Impact Payments

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U.S. Attorney Gretchen C.F. Shappert, Special Agent in Charge Michael J. De Palma of the Internal Revenue Service – Criminal Investigation (IRS-CI), Director Joel A. Lee of the VI Bureau of Internal Revenue (the Bureau) and V.I. Attorney General Denise N. George, today warned taxpayers to be alert to possible scams relating to COVID-19, especially in connection with economic impact payments.

The announcement is an effort to prevent taxpayers from being victimized by criminals using the recently approved COVID-19 payments as an opportunity to commit a crime, the U.S. Attorney's

Office said.

“Fraudsters who prey on vulnerable victims will be held accountable for their criminal conduct. Federal law enforcement and federal prosecutors urge the public to be aware of scams associated with the COVID-19 crisis and schemes designed to interfere with receipt of legitimate federal tax refunds and COVID-19 economic impact payments. We urge all Americans to be vigilant and to report any suspicious activity to federal law enforcement,” stated U.S. Attorney Shappert.

In the Virgin Islands, COVID-19 economic impact payments will be on their way during the month of May. For Virgin Islands taxpayers, this payment will be via check to the mailing address on the taxpayers’ 2018 individual income tax returns. Everyone receiving a COVID-19 related economic impact payment from the government is at risk, according to the release.

“Even as our Nation is enduring a State of Emergency, criminals will continue to engage in heinous acts to further enrich themselves demonstrating no sympathy by exploiting you during your most difficult circumstance,” warned Mr. De Palma.

Joel A. Lee, Director of the Bureau, reminded bona fide residents of the Virgin Islands that they should file and pay taxes to the Bureau. “The Economic Impact Payments, or the stimulus payments, will be coming directly to Virgin Islands taxpayers from the Department of Finance. Virgin Islands residents who fraudulently filed IRS returns or otherwise received an EIP from IRS must repay the IRS or be subject to possible criminal prosecution, since they are to receive their EIP directly from the US Virgin Islands,” explained Mr. Lee.

“There is certainly a wave of COVID-19 fraud that focuses on all areas of consumer vulnerability. The Virgin Islands Department of Justice will vigorously prosecute violations of our anti-fraud laws. Nonetheless, it is more important than ever during these trying times that Virgin Islands residents remain vigilant by taking extra precautions to avoid becoming victimized,” emphasized A.G. George.

These offices offer the following guidance to the public to warn about potential scams:

- The Bureau, through the Department of Finance, will mail your check to the last known address on your 2018 tax return.
- Neither the Bureau nor IRS will call and ask you to verify your payment details. Do not give out your bank account, debit account, or PayPal account information – even if someone claims it’s necessary to get your check. The caller may be perpetrating a scam.
- If you receive a call relating to your tax return, don’t engage with possible scammers or thieves, even if you want to tell them that you know it’s a scam. The best advice is to just hang up the phone. If you receive texts or emails claiming that you can get your money faster by sending personal information or clicking on links, delete them. Don’t click on any links in those emails or texts.
- Reports are also circulating about bogus checks. It will take the Bureau and the Department of Finance several weeks to mail the checks out. If you receive a “check” for an odd amount (especially one with cents), or a check that requires that you verify the check online or by calling a number, it’s likely a fraud.

“During these unprecedented and uncertain times, Virgin Islanders need to come together and address the current challenges with a purpose,” Shappert said. “Our citizens should not allow criminals to victimize innocent people by exploiting emotions during this crisis. Everyone is advised to stay connected and to inform law enforcement, family, and friends of any suspicious

activity that may involve a fraud or financial scam.”

“IRS Criminal Investigation will continue to pursue criminals who violate the law and attack our community. IRS-CI will work diligently alongside the Department of Justice and our law enforcement counterparts to identify scams, stop the con-artists in their tracks and bring them to justice.” said. De Palma.

For more information, visit the IRS website at www.irs.gov/coronavirus. To learn more about Department of Justice resources, involving the COVID-19 crisis, visit the DOJ Website: <http://www.justice.gov/coronavirus>.

You can also contact the National Center for Disaster Fraud Hotline at 866-720-5721 or via email at disaster@leo.gov.

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