

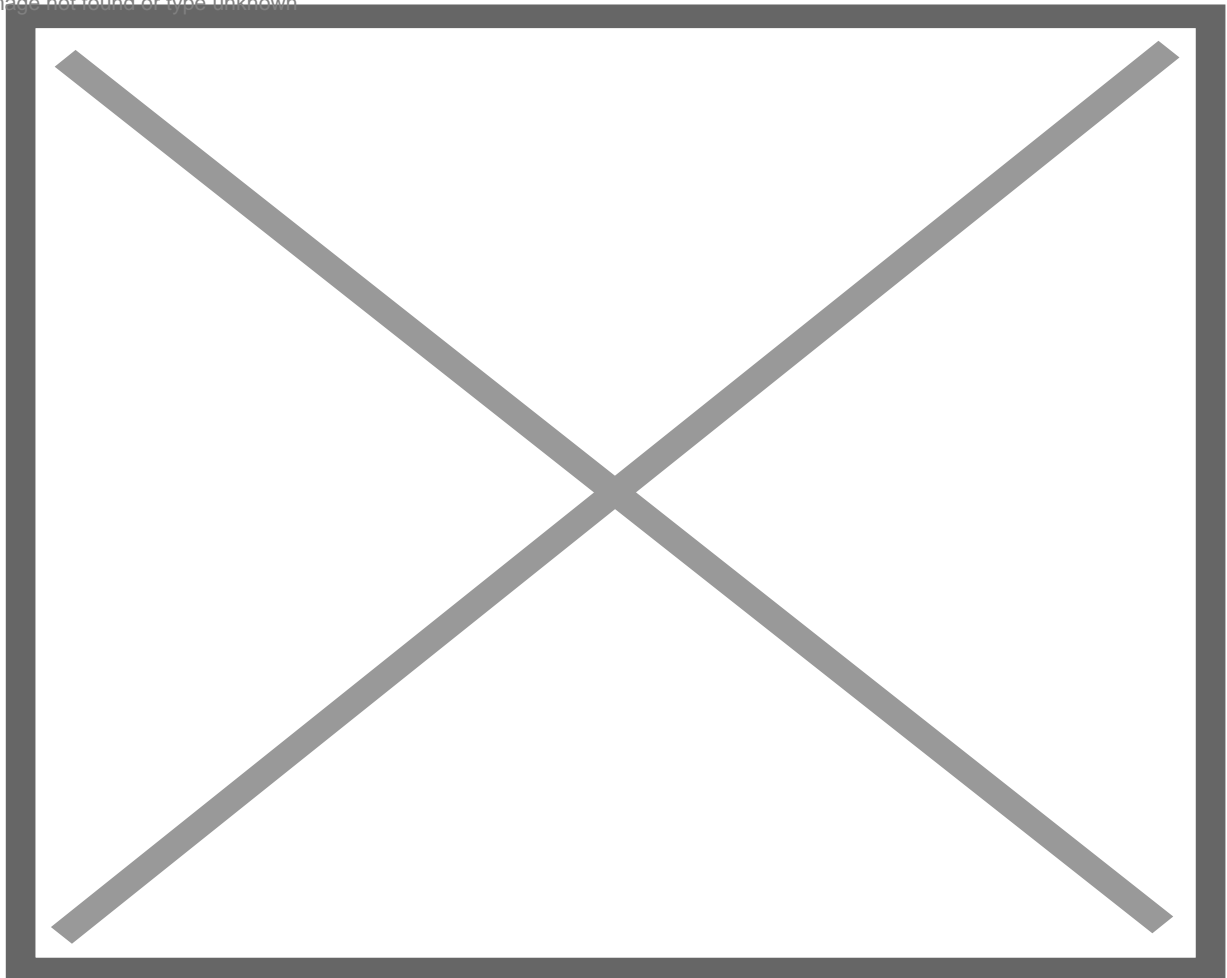
logo not found or type unknown

# Coronavirus Effect: Gov't Working to Provide WAPA With Millions as Subsidies for Residents, Businesses From \$75 Million Stimulus; Dept. of Education Adapts to Changing Coronavirus Reality; Territory Prepares for Surge in Cases

Coronavirus / **Published On April 23, 2020 04:39 AM /**

Robert Moore **April 23, 2020**

Image not found or type unknown



Gov. Albert Bryan, along with Army Corps of Engineers Col. Daniel Hibner and Education Commissioner Raquel Berry Benjamin provided the mid-week COVID-19 update Wednesday afternoon from Government House on St. Croix. Here are the big takeaways:

**\$75 Million Federal Stimulus Payment is in the GVI Bank Account**

The Government of the Virgin Islands has received the \$75 million boost from round one of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act passed by Congress, to help carry the territory through the COVID-19 pandemic. "This is money we really needed to respond to some of the things that are happening locally," Mr. Bryan said.

The immediate spending priorities, according to the governor, are largely subsidies to big business, including the Water and Power Authority. On the priorities list:

The Your Energy Stimulus (YES) Program. The YES plan will provide a \$250 credit on every residential customer's electricity bill and a \$500 credit per commercial customer. "We are close to getting this squared away so you are able to see that on your bill" as early as May, the governor said. But don't expect a YES check. The \$250 to \$500 per customer Your Energy Stimulus money goes to the Water and Power Authority, which is supposed to then credit each customer accordingly. The exact price tag for this program was unclear, but it will be in the millions.

Subsidizing the St. Thomas-St. John ferry companies under the so-called "Safe Transit" program. "One of the things we did early on was try to get the ferries to limit the number of people traveling to and from St. John. That, of course, had an economic result. So we are setting aside funds to give to both passenger ferry companies." Again, the governor provided no specifics on the cost of the ferry subsidies.

Funding the Disabled and Senior Citizen Transit Providers. "We want to be able to provide transit for those people who are in the highest risk and may not be able to get around as they did through VITRAN," the governor said.

### **Territory Prepping for a Surge in COVID-19 Cases**

The number of confirmed COVID-19 cases remains in the low 50s. Still, public health officials are preparing for a surge in coronavirus hospitalizations.

"We will have infection surges," Mr. Bryan said, adding that the government's primary concern is being prepared to isolate outbreaks and providing patients "with the best medical care available."

The Schneider Regional Medical Center has completed the "COVID-19 Wing" of the hospital with 20 acute care beds set aside for patients who have tested positive for coronavirus infection. Among other things, the COVID-19 "suite is equipped with negative pressure in order to isolate any virus infections in that part of the hospital and to make sure we don't have spread from that wing," Mr. Bryan said.

Meanwhile, the Army Corps of Engineers and the Federal Emergency Management Agency are coordinating work on a 46-bed alternative care facility for COVID-19 patients at the National Guard Research Training Institute (RTI) in Estate Bethlehem, St. Croix. The conversion of RTI barracks into the hospital care unit will be fully functional in the early days of May, said Col. Hibner, the Army Corps Savannah District Commander.

The peak virus infection date was pegged at or about May 8. The peak — the potential height of positive cases and hospitalizations — is a moving target because of the many factors at play, including whether Virgin Islanders continue to exercise social distancing, use proper hand-washing etiquette and, where necessary, self-isolate.

"This pandemic is going to be with us for a while longer. Our strategy is to prepare for pandemic management as a new way of life," the governor said.

## **VI Public Schools Continue to Adapt to New COVID-19 Reality**

The VI Department of Education has restructured the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year, paring the calendar down to three marking periods. "By doing this, students overall final averages will be calculated using final averages for the first, second and third marking period," said Education Commissioner Raquel Berry Benjamin.

The fourth marking period will not be included in the calculation of final grade average. "The fourth marking period will be used for academic enhancement or credit recovery. Grades earned during the fourth marking period will be used to replace a student's failing third marking period grade or enhance a student's passing grade," Ms. Berry Benjamin said. "An average of 70 percent is the required passing minimum grade per student."

The department will soon distribute laptops and internet devices for students in need, the commissioner said. "The priority will be given to 12th grade students who have earned less than a 70 percent average as of March 17th. The items will be further distributed to 11th graders down with average of less than 70 percent. Students who are passing but are in need of the electronics will be the last in line, Ms. Berry Benjamin said.

A distribution schedule will be publicized when it is finalized.