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USVI Establishing 'Health and Safety Guidelines' for the Hospitality Industry as the Return of Tourists Approaches

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Robert Moore **May 28, 2020**

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On the eve of the territory reopening to tourists, public health and travel leaders sought to reassure members of the Senate that a plan is in place to protect Virgin Islanders and visitors as safe as possible during the coronavirus pandemic.

"We are prepared to do everything to prevent a surge in new cases," Commissioner of Health Justa Encarnacion told members of the Senate Committee on Culture, Historic Preservation and Aging. "Any door that is opened as we move through each phase (of the return of leisure travel), it can be closed" if a second outbreak of the deadly respiratory disease strikes.

The committee, chaired by Sen. Myron Jackson, convened at the Capitol on Wednesday to take testimony on the status of COVID-19 protocols for the reopening of the historic towns of Charlotte Amalie, Christiansted, Frederiksted and Cruz Bay to tourists. Lawmakers also heard testimony on town revitalization projects and stimulus payments for senior citizens who are collecting benefits under the federal CARES Act.

A COVID-19 state of emergency, declared by Gov. Albert Bryan in March, remains in place until July 11th. Under the "phased re-opening" of the territory, leisure travel is slated to resume next week, on June 1.

"The Virgin Islands is a destination," Mr. Jackson said. "The territory is scheduled to re-open next week, however, there are places in the United States in which the government-mandated safety protocols for COVID-19 are breached. There is a lapse in social distancing and a lack of people wearing masks, yet these are the same people who will be visiting the Virgin Islands. The community needs to know that their health is entrusted in your care."

The departments of Tourism, Health and the Office of the Governor have collaborated on a comprehensive plan — the "Health and Safety Guidelines for the USVI Tourism Industry" — that will outline protocols and procedures for the hospitality industry, said Tourism Commissioner Joseph Boschulte.

Mr. Boschulte also noted that informational flyers will be handed out to arriving tourists.

Among other things, the guidelines will spell out the proper social distancing and sanitization for guests and workers in hotels, restaurants, bars, tourist attractions and transportation services such as taxis, limos, and safaris, said Lisa Hamilton, president of the USVI Hotel and Tourism Association.

"Our priority is the safety and security of the staff and visitors to the islands," Ms. Hamilton said. "We are focusing attention on information and collaboration among all potential sources of transmission — hotels, restaurants, gyms, spas, attractions, jewelry stores."

Some lawmakers were unconvinced the government was prepared for guests.

"I recommend that the territory remains shut down to retain and manage the spread of the coronavirus in our community because we are opening the flood gates at the expense of the health of our people," said Sen. Oakland Benta.

Sen. Dwayne DeGraff doesn't think the time is right. "I am extremely fearful of the reopening, especially for our seniors," he said.

Even though the first COVID-19 case in the territory occurred after a St. Thomian was infected during travel outside of the territory, Ms. Encarnacion said she understood a reopening of the economy to travelers is necessary.

The economic harm done to the territory's coffers as a result of the coronavirus outbreak is estimated at \$250 million in losses as tourism revenues plunged, according to Mr. Boschulte.

Separately, the Commissioner of Public Works Nelson Petty updated lawmakers on revitalization efforts. The Main Street Enhancement Project is slated to be completed by August 2020. It is 85% completed with over \$11 million expended out of the contract totaling \$14,625,004. Both the Christiansted Town Project and the Frederiksted Town Project are scheduled for road repairs

beginning in a few months, he said.

Joel Lee, Director of the V.I Bureau of Internal Revenue said 24,700 stimulus checks totaling \$39,826,412 have been delivered to eligible residents.

In a written statement submitted to the committee, lawmakers were told that Social Security beneficiaries in U.S. Territories, like all other Americans, should be able to receive their relief payments automatically and without having to file additional paperwork.

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