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Covid-19: Restaurants Have an Additional Week to Prepare for Use of Disposable Plates, Forks, Knives, Spoons and Other Serving Utensils

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Restaurant owners now have until June 15th to use disposable products - paper plates, plastic forks, knives, spoons, etc - when serving diners, the territory's top public health official said on Monday. The call for the use of disposable utensils is a part of the VI government's mandates on food and beverage industry, newly reopened to diners amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

VI Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion said during the Government House weekly COVID-19 update to the territory that the guidance from the VI Department of Health was late in coming, so restaurants will be given a week-long reprieve before the VIDOH's environmental team fans out to help enforce the new rules. The commissioner said the use of disposable serving ware could change, "depending on whether or not we continue to progress with no community spread" of the

deadly coronavirus.

Ms. Encarnacion said the territory was following, as always, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommendations on restaurants and other places that serve food and beverages as they scale up for operations. But the decision to hold off on enforcing the health guidance comes amid some controversy. Some restaurateurs have pushed back against the rule, saying that the CDC guidance recommends throw-away utensils should be used “when feasible” but not necessarily in all instances.

According to the CDC’s Activities and Initiatives Supporting the COVID-19 Response and the president’s Plan for Opening America Up Again document, restaurants should “... Use disposable food service items (utensils, dishes). If disposable items are not feasible, ensure that all non-disposable food service items are handled with gloves and washed with dish soap and hot water or in a dishwasher ...”

Ms. Encarnacion and Governor Albert Bryan cautioned diners that social distancing must be observed as well while dining. “Go the restaurants. Be safe. But remember that being in a closed environment (such as indoor dining) without a mask does expose you to the possibility of transmission of COVID-19.”

During his weekly update Mr. Bryan reminded residents that while there have been no significant increases in the number of new cases, the threat of the virus remains real.

“While we are looking good so far in our testing and number of active cases, I want to remind the public that we are still very much in this battle against the spread of COVID in the territory,” the territory’s leader said. “As a matter of fact, just this weekend I had to remind someone that we are still in a state of emergency in the territory.”

The governor urged residents not to let their guard down, particularly when going to bars and nightclubs. He also reminded the community to continue wearing face masks and practicing social distancing.

“We have been seeing a lot of activity around the bars, including large crowds and individuals not practicing safe social distancing. I need people to understand that patronizing these establishments places you at a higher than usual risk, so please adhere to the guidelines and take additional precautionary measures,” he said.

Stimulus checks

- The Department of Finance last week issued an additional 3,665 checks totaling just more than \$6.1 million dollars.
- To date, 28,263 stimulus checks totaling \$45.9 million have been issued.
- The Government of the Virgin Islands still is waiting for the list of beneficiaries from the Social Security Administration.

YES credits

- The V.I. Water and Power Authority has completed its May billing cycle and all YES program credits have been applied to ratepayers’ accounts.

- To date, WAPA has issued \$250 credits to 44,157 residential ratepayers and \$500 credits to 7,671 commercial ratepayers.
- A total of 51,828 ratepayers have received YES credits.

Unemployment benefits

- As of June 5th, the Department of Labor has issued 11,291 unemployment insurance checks totaling \$8.2 million dollars.
- The Labor Department has issued 6,599 Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation checks totaling \$13.1 million dollars.
- The total amount of unemployment benefits issued is just more than \$21.3.
- The Department of Labor has secured a contract with InTouch Call Center, and the public can get information about any COVID-19-related employment security issues and unemployment benefits by calling 1-877-374-0356.
- The call center is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

COVID-19 cases

- Currently tracking 3 active cases
- 2,202 individuals tested to date
- 2,128 of those tests were negative
- 71 tests came back positive
- 63 recovered
- 3 tests are pending
- 6 fatalities to date
- No COVID-19 patients are hospitalized at Juan F. Luis Hospital on St. Croix.
- One COVID-19 patient is hospitalized and improving at Schneider Regional Medical Center on St. Thomas.