

logo not found or type unknown

# Bryan Lashes out at Senators and Media, Says He's for Territory's Youth in Defending \$1 Million Deal Awarded to Daughter's Company

Government / **Published On July 24, 2020 09:46 AM /**

Ernice Gilbert **July 24, 2020**

Image not found or type unknown



**Governor Albert Bryan during the 2018 General Election By. MEDIA ONE PRODUCTIONS**

Governor Albert Bryan, under pressure after it was revealed that a company owned by his daughter and good friend was chosen for a \$1 million Dept. of Health contract within 72 hours to perform coronavirus contact tracking work — even though the company has no experience or background to do the important job — on Tuesday forewent his regular Covid-19 press briefing, where the press could ask questions, and instead appeared on the administration's "Press Box" program, a no-pressure setting that allowed Mr. Bryan to speak directly to residents and answer select questions without having to face the media.

During the 30-minute affair the governor, visibly frustrated, went off about the furor that has engulfed the Virgin Islands community [following the revelation](#) of the contract during a Tuesday Committee on Finance hearing.

He lashed out at lawmakers, namely Senator Kurt Vialet and Janelle Sarauw, who expressed dissatisfaction with the Avera deal.

"It's election season 2020. It comes as no surprise to me that my political enemies want to do something because they think this is a referendum on Albert Bryan," the governor pushed back. "This is a referendum on the people of the Virgin Islands and if we're really going to change course or we're going to stand as obstructionists to a governor who is transparent trying to do the right things."

Mr. Bryan then pushed a more aggressive narrative. "See, we are 9 days away to a primary election and a 100 days away from a midterm, so it's fit for leaders to eat their young in order for them to be successful."

Senator Vialet responded to the governor during an interview Thursday evening with the Consortium. He said the Legislature has an oversight role to play in government, and that lawmakers saw as worrisome the manner in which the Avera deal was approved.

"The concerns raised on the floor was about the lack of following procurement processes as per Virgin Islands code. And despite the fact that we have a state of emergency, there are still some basic processes that must be in place in order to make sure that you're complying with the rules and regulations that govern the Virgin Islands and govern federal monies," Mr. Vialet said. "And in this instance, it was clear that the proper procedures were not implemented. The 72-hour contract solicitation and awarding of a contract, we found that to be highly suspicious."

The senator added, "Tonight I heard him say that the contract isn't fully executed and they don't have a contract. But I think he needs to remember that on the floor, the question was asked, do we have a contract for contact tracing and Dept. of Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion said yes. We asked her who is the vendor and she said Avera. We asked the amount she said \$998,000. So that came from his administration. We didn't make that up. We responded to what we heard on the floor in reference to them on an exigent basis procuring a contract within 72 hours."

Ms. Encarnacion also said that D.O.H. had gotten in contact with two other companies and only Avera responded. Mr. Vialet said he researched one of the firms D.O.H. said it had contacted and concluded that the firm had no background in contact tracing.

"One of the firms is a pharmaceutical company, so none of the companies are doing contact tracing. And the recommendation to the commissioner of health and also to Government House was that we want to make sure that when we're spending local and federal monies, that we follow Virgin Islands Code. The exigent measure does not allow you to just circumvent everything; you still have to be upfront, you still have to be able to go out and get a request for proposal for the project. You could shorten the time period but to just not have it at all is something that the Senate can't agree with," Mr. Vialet, chairman of the powerful Finance Committee, said.

He added, "People have always complained about the Senate not exercising its oversight responsibility, and that's what we're doing. It's check and balance. It's nothing personal."

Mr. Bryan went on with his harangue on the "Press Box" Thursday evening. "I am the governor of the Virgin Islands, I didn't happen upon this job, I trained and I practiced for this job. I

campaigned for this job. You want to attack, attack me. Don't attack our young people in the Virgin Islands."

Mr. Bryan then took aim at the media, calling out the V.I. Daily News, which included on its front-page [this image](#) of Aliyah Bryan, the governor's daughter, Michale K. Pemberton, co-owner of Avera with Ms. Bryan, and two other executives of the company, and asked 'Who is Avera Tech?'

"Putting them on the front of the paper like common criminals when they have done nothing wrong. That's what we're about? Is that what we have come to? If you want to attack, attack the governor, I sign up for this. But don't sacrifice my young people for your own gain."

It was not clear what attack Mr. Bryan was referring to. All media outlets that reported on the Avera matter received their information from Senate hearing proceedings based on questions from senators and responses from Dept. of Health officials.

"That's not what we're about here in the Virgin Islands and I hope that's not what our public supports," Mr. Bryan went on. He continued with his claim that the media and lawmakers were attacking the territory's children. "We got to make sure that we don't attack our children and make their bones line our way to another election" Mr. Bryan said.

The governor slammed senators for what he said was their inaction "for the two years that you've been paying them."

Mr. Bryan said he wasn't aware of the details relative to the Avera bid process. He added that the process was "Followed to the tee." The governor then spoke of the exigent nature of the contract as the territory continues to battle the coronavirus pandemic, and the immediate need of contact tracing as the reason for the haste in which Avera was selected.

"No one has experience with contact tracing these days. No one. This is something we're all learning," the governor said.

Contact tracing, however, has been a pillar of communicable disease control in public health for decades. The eradication of smallpox, for example, was achieved not by universal immunization, but by exhaustive contact tracing to find all infected persons. This was followed by isolation of infected individuals and immunization of the surrounding community and contacts at-risk of contracting smallpox.

Mr. Bryan defended Avera strenuously and said no wrongdoing had been identified. "The reality is, there is no contract," he said, contradicting what his commissioner said on the Senate floor (in a statement issued Wednesday, Ms. Encarnacion clarified that the contract had not been finalized). The governor said the bid was accepted and that he wasn't even sure the talks had reached Ms. Encarnacion. He also said he would not support the deal at its current length of 3 years.

On the Senate floor, Ms. Encarnacion said she had discussions with Avera all last week. Asked if the company had experience with the important function of contact tracing, which could mean life and death as it relates to tracking individuals to help prevent the spread of the deadly disease, Ms. Encarnacion said, "This is actually a new company so they do not have prior experience. So we're providing the youth of the VI an opportunity to be able to get some experience."