

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Mapp's 'Biggest Loser' Initiative Placed On Hold

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ST. CROIX -- Governor Kenneth Mapp said [during an interview](#) with The Consortium on Thursday, that his "Biggest Loser" initiative -- a wellness effort aimed at fostering healthy living for Virgin Islanders, especially those employed with the Government of the Virgin Islands -- is currently on hold because his administration had to deal with more pressing matters, including seeking alternative ways of raising funds after being rejected by bond market.

"We got off track with it," Mr. Mapp admitted. "When we got foreclosed from the [bond] market, we had to turn our sights really on how to get the ship together. And you know we went through that major debate and discussion with the community on whether we should tax rum and cigarettes so people can go to school and get hospital benefits."

Mr. Mapp said the insurance policy of the government has been under immense stress because of the amount of employees who suffer with one or more illnesses. When the governor announced the program in October of 2016 [at a press conference](#), he said he was working with the departments of Health, and Sports, Parks and Recreation to bring new programs to the territory emphasizing healthier lifestyles.

"Improving the health of Virgin Islanders will enhance our quality of life, reduce the burden on our health care facilities and lower the cost of insurance premiums," the territory's leader said at the 2016 press conference. He said that the U.S. Virgin Islands spends more than \$165 million on insurance premiums, representing nearly a quarter of the entire territorial budget. More than 26,000 Virgin Islanders are covered by the government's health insurance plans, according to the governor. Of that amount, over 7,000 suffer with a catastrophic or chronic disease; 30 percent of the plan's participants are struggling with hypertension; and 22 percent with diabetes. Some members of the plan, the governor revealed, suffer with 3-4 illnesses, to include cardiac, sight and cancer issues.

On Thursday, Mr. Mapp said his administration had not forgotten about the program. "We have to turn our sights back to it because it's really a direct impact on our insurance premium," he said. "And if we don't change to a wellness plan under the insurance program, we're not going to be able to afford health insurance. We're going to get back on track with it with the Biggest Loser company and the foundation."

During the October 2016 press conference, the chief executive discussed his participation in a wellness and weight loss program run by the creators of the Biggest Loser television show. The programs operate out of various Marriott resort properties across the United States and offer healthy meals and classes covering both fitness and nutrition.

Mr. Mapp, who participated with representatives from D.O.H., Sports, Parks and Recreation, as well as the Department of Tourism and the GVI Insurance Board, had high praise for the Biggest Loser program.

He said that other insurance plans cover employee enrollment at programs such as those offered by the Biggest Loser, and that the Insurance Board was working to negotiate reimbursement for its members going forward. In the meantime, he said, the government and the Insurance Board would be working with the company to help develop a Virgin Islands wellness strategy and that the territory's doctors and fitness experts would be invited to participate in upcoming discussions.

Part of the strategy, Mr. Mapp revealed, would include the building of wellness centers in both island districts where residents would be able to exercise. The government would employ local trainers to lead the effort, but he stressed that trainers would need to be learned professionals with documentation proving their expertise.

Asked by The Consortium if he had lost weight at the Biggest Loser program in California, where he trained for about a week, the governor swiftly affirmed that he had dropped a few pounds. "I lost weight and I lost inches," he said.

D.O.H. Commissioner Dr. Michelle Davis was among those that took part in the program, lauding its comprehensive approach.

“We learned about a mind, body and soul conversion,” she said.

The governor said there was also an effort to bring a Biggest Loser program to a Virgin Islands resort in order to bolster the territory’s tourism product. He said the government “did not pay any fee” for his actual participation in the Biggest Loser program, but rather covered only his travel expenses.

And Mr. Mapp, who has been open about his own health and weight loss challenges, said he would continue to remain very involved in promoting wellness for all Virgin Islanders.

“I am holding myself up as a poster child,” he said in October 2016. “We are going to do this as a community effort and I am working to put the necessary resources on the table.”

But talk of losing weight faded quickly, and with it any plans to help the territory get healthier. And with only months remaining in office before seeking reelection, and number of other pressing issues facing the U.S.V.I., it remains to be seen whether the governor will actually get back on track with the program.