

The Virgin Islands Consortium

14 States Hit Record-Low Unemployment; VI Government Mum On Post-Hurricane Figures

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ST. THOMAS -- The U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico have experienced [what experts have characterized](#) as a mass exodus of working residents following two destructive hurricanes in September. Both territories have continued to see their populations decline in wake of the storms, according to recent [data](#).

Yet since Hurricanes Irma and Maria made landfall last September, the Virgin Islands Department of Labor (D.O.L.) has not updated the public on new unemployment data. What's probably more stunning is that the department hasn't updated the public on any new unemployment data since last July.

According to a recent report from Washington-based online paper [The Hill](#), 14 states hit record-low unemployment rates this year. Among the lower unemployment rates in the U.S. is Colorado's, with only 3.1 percent of the those seeking jobs in the state still without.

July's territory-wide unemployment figures sit unchanged at 10 percent, down 0.6 percent from the report published in June. In January of 2013, St. Croix's unemployment rate hit its peak of nearly 18 percent. The D.O.L.'s full report can be viewed [here](#).

Governor Kenneth Mapp [delivered his most recent State of the Territory Address in January](#), announcing that there would be a approximately 2,500 jobs through the Sheltering & Temporary Essential Power Program (STEP). "The Department of Labor played an integral role in ensuring that unemployment benefits were not interrupted and was able to process applications for members of the private sector who lost their jobs," Mr. Mapp said in his address to the territory. The governor has also said that the territory's economy will be driven in large part by growth in the construction industry for the next few years.

Following the announcement of his candidacy for governor two weeks ago, former Labor Commissioner Albert Bryan Jr. spoke of how the unemployment rate can negatively impact the price of wages, including new entrants into the market. Mr. Bryan said that many businesses use this data when considering doing business in the U.S.V.I.

"Our unemployment was about 18 percent on St. Croix in 2013, and it has been lowering not because we've been creating jobs; people are migrating away from the area," Mr. Bryan said.

The closure of HOVENSA on St. Croix was the reason for the uptick in 2013, Mr. Bryan said. Roughly 2,100 people were laid off when the refinery closed its doors, accounting for "almost 10 percent of the workforce in St. Croix and 5 percent of the workforce in the Virgin Islands," the former D.O.L. commissioner said.

It's important to note that only individuals actively searching for work are represented in the department's unemployment statistics. This means that when disaster unemployment benefits end in September for many Virgin Islanders, the unemployment rate could potentially shift again.

Puerto Rico's unemployment rate has risen to almost 11 percent since it released its latest report in December. The Department of Labor could not be reached for comment.