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60-Day State of Emergency Extension Granted; COVID-19 Infections Increased From 72 to 576 in Two Months

Coronavirus / **Published On August 11, 2020 05:23 AM /**

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ST. THOMAS — During a Committee of the Whole hearing on Monday, lawmakers granted Governor Albert Bryan’s request of a 60-day extension to the state of emergency declaration, which administration officials said will ensure that the territory maintains access to federal benefits and assistance that arise from emergency status relative to Covid-19. Bill No. 33-0359 seeks to extend the declaration from August 10 through October 9, 2020. Department of Health statistics show that the number of Covid-19 infections has increased from 72 on June 9 to 576 through August 10.

V.I. law allows only for a 30-day extension, but Mr. Bryan asked the Senate to suspend the portion of the law that limits the extension to 30 days — Title 23 of the V.I. Code — contending that the virus is unpredictable and is expected to continue affecting the USVI for a long time.

The governor first declared a state of emergency on March 13 in preparation of the likely spread of novel coronavirus in the USVI. Bill No. 33-0359 is the second request for a 60-day extension to the USVI state of emergency order since then. Government House's concern is that the USVI as a travel destination is not immune to COVID-19, and implementation of the extension would provide additional time to allow the territory to continue to employ measures to manage and combat the virus and address conditions of the pandemic.

Justa Encarnacion, D.O.H. Commissioner, spoke of how critical it is for the USVI to maintain an active state of emergency order which she said will ensure that the territory retains access to federal benefits and assistance that arise from emergency status since Covid-19 infections continue to rise daily. Ms. Encarnacion encouraged the public to remain cautious and continue to wear masks because the insidious nature of the virus is its ability to present as asymptomatic (showing no symptoms). "We all have a role to play in our personal safety as well as that of our family, friends and community," she said.

The challenges posed by the virulent disease are compounded by the imminent threat of the 2020 Hurricane Season, a concern that was shared by Mr. Bryan with Senate President Novelle Francis.

"The threat of COVID-19 is even more impactful to our territory as the 2020 Hurricane Season is actively upon us, with the early arrival of storms and hurricanes looming out at sea," Mr. Bryan wrote. Those concerns were also evident on the floor of the Legislature as Senator Donna Frett-Gregory posed a question to VITEMA Director Daryl Jaschen regarding VITEMA's [failure to provide sandbags during the last storm](#). Mr. Jaschen explained that the agency is now prepared to provide sandbags to the community for pick up on August 13 and August 18, while adhering to strict social distancing guidelines and other safety measures.

Citing the possibility of infection and the importance of social distancing to prevent the spread of the disease, Mr. Jaschen articulated that VITEMA faces a challenge of safely providing emergency shelters for members of the community. "Shelters should be a last option to consider during a storm because of the contagion," he said, adding that members of the community should develop an at-home plan first before considering a shelter. Also because of the pandemic, shelters can no longer house their usual number of occupants.

During testimony at yesterday's meeting, D.O.H. unveiled new strategies to curtail and decrease the spread of Covid-19.

- A fresh grass-roots approach to increasing awareness and understanding of the modes of transmission
- The positive impact of simply wearing a mask verses the serious and negative impact of hospitalization or death for those who contract the disease from a family member who failed to wear a mask around them.
- Expanded approach to testing throughout the territory. (The USVI now has 11 Abbott Now machines that have been strategically placed to reach those most vulnerable, D.O.H. said)
- Implementation of "pop up" testing sites lead by D.O.H.'s Office of the Commissioner's Team and the Communicable Disease Division.
- Education and training of all clinical divisions so that they can join in the effort of sharing the lessons learned, conducting tests, and collecting data.
- Provide consultation and Public Health guidance to many agencies and businesses
- D.O.H. has hired a total of 18 local staff to perform manual contact tracing, specimen collectors and conduct registration checks.

- The department started its Hurricane/COVID-19 preparation in collaboration with VITEMA, the Department of Human Services (DHS), and other Emergency Services Functions.
- Joined the VIPD Enforcement Task Force and deputized identified members of the leadership team who now partners with members of the task force, which has increased the territory's capacity to enforce the mandates identified by the Governor's Executive Order.
- Mobilized the Virgin Islands National Guard (VING) for compliance monitoring at air and seaports (There are still gaps in that area that D.O.H. said it will close with the implementation of the electronic contact tracing).
- Hired a manager for the alternative care site on St. Croix and increased staffing and utilized Pafford services to deploy a total of over 50 clinical staff to support the territory's first responders in EMS, hospitals and now dialysis.
- Instituted virtual behavioral health telehealth services and educational opportunities.

Homeless population

Senator Javan James asked the Dept. of Health how many homeless people tested positive for the coronavirus. Ms. Encarnacion said D.O.H. recently discovered a gap in testing for the homeless population and that the department has been working with the Lighthouse Missions in Times Square. "We are also considering pop up sites," she said. "Please do," Mr. James replied, "Because they are a part of our community and they can be carriers." Mr. James informed the legislative body that he wanted to be sure the homeless population was given the same attention as the rest of the community.

Also, at Mr. James' prompting, Dr. Esther Ellis, territorial epidemiologist, revealed that of the 547 positive Covid-19 cases in the territory, 125 (23%) of them were asymptomatic. Mr. James was concerned about the need for contact tracing and the status of finding a company. D.O.H. shared that it was in the vetting process to find a reputable firm to conduct contact tracing since the [debacle with Avera](#) came to an end. The senator requested that in the future, all contact tracing information be shared with the Legislature so that the body can be actively involved in the process to alleviate any future problems.