

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Additional Paid Leave Granted to Healthcare Workers and First Responders Thanks to Gittens-Sponsored Legislation Now Law

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Frontline healthcare workers and first responders remain at greatest risk during this global pandemic and now have additional paid leave thanks to legislation sponsored by Senator Kenneth Gittens, according to a release from the senator's office issued Wednesday.

Mr. Gittens's bill creates an avenue for these public servants to be granted additional leave during a State of Emergency if infected with coronavirus while carrying out their duties.

Act 8327 was signed into law by Governor Albert Bryan on Thursday and takes effect immediately. Emergency medical technicians, nurses, police officers, firefighters and other frontline support staff - to include those working at the Bureau of Corrections and at Human Services - will be entitled to up to 80 hours of special paid leave if they show symptoms that require diagnosis or quarantine, or experience acute health issues linked to the time spent in their place of employment.

"In bringing forth this measure, we are showing our first responders and their support staff that we appreciate and understand their sacrifices. I can only imagine the stress they are under," Mr. Gittens said. "I would like to thank the Governor and my colleagues for supporting this critical measure."

The senator said the COVID-19 Leave Act was all too timely given the unfortunate recent spike in cases and reports of infections at both Queen Louise Home for the Aged and Bureau of Corrections on St. Thomas, despite restricted access. In light of increasing coronavirus cases, Senator Gittens has called on Governor Bryan to step up public health enforcement efforts. He's also asking the Governor to impose a temporary Stay-at-Home order to include rolling back on allowances for visitors.

"Clearly the staff at these impacted facilities has been infected out in the community renewing my call for rapid testing to be made available on a daily basis to the employees at our hospitals, senior homes and jails," he said. "We are quickly approaching a number of cases that will overwhelm our local healthcare system."

Mr. Gittens said the territory must act swiftly and seriously.

"We need to do better at screening those who arrive at our airports," the lawmaker said. "We have all heard too many stories of test results not being checked or people being allowed to 'self-quarantine' with no follow up. This is unacceptable."

Mr. Gittens said he supports Mr. Bryan's announcement of expanded public health enforcement measures, but that it was time for aggressive action and daily reporting of violations.

"We should at the very least get a daily report in terms of how many tickets are being issued for those that violate these orders," he said. "These updates would also provide a deterrent to those unsafely congregating or not wearing masks as directed."

Mr. Gittens said that a hotline for reporting violations of public health orders must also be established.

"We don't want to use our 911 system to report someone serving drinks without a mask, but we certainly need a mechanism for the community to contact the appropriate authority with concerns," the senator concluded.