

The Virgin Islands Consortium

58 National Park Service Employees In USVI Furloughed Because Of Government Shutdown; FEMA, Food Stamps, School Lunch At Risk

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The impasse between the White House and Congressional Democrats that has led to a partial government shutdown is now affecting federal employees in the U.S. Virgin Islands, Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett said during a press conference she held at the Henry E. Rohlsen Airport on Tuesday.

Soon enough, the shutdown will begin to affect services that thousands of Virgin Islanders rely on, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, called SNAP and known widely as Food Stamps, along with funding for FEMA and the School Lunch

Program that public schools depend on to feed students.

Nutrition assistance, including food stamps and school lunch programs will be reduced by 40 percent if the shutdown continues past January, Ms. Plaskett said. "Congress has not allocated funding for SNAP beyond January, and the program's emergency reserves would not cover even two-thirds of February's payments, according to past disbursements," she said.

During the press conference, Ms. Plaskett listed a number of areas currently being affected and stand to be if the shutdown continues past January. She also mentioned the federal arms not being affected by the partial government shutdown.

Mail won't be affected, the delegate said. She said the Postal Service operates on revenues it generates and not tax dollars.

Citizens already receiving Social Security checks will not be impacted, the delegate made known. However, if you're trying to get into the system, you will not be able to because applications are not able to be processed.

Medicare and Medicaid will operate normally during the shutdown period, Ms. Plaskett said. However, as it relates to taxes, taxpayer assistance will likely be difficult as there will be no employees at the Internal Revenue Service to help. Tax refunds could also be impacted if the shutdown continues," she said. Also, passports are not being processed.

National Parks Service employees have been furloughed, which means they are on leave without pay, the delegate said. There are 58 National Park Service employees in the U.S. Virgin Islands: thirteen on St. Croix and the rest on St. John (some living in St. Thomas), Ms. Plaskett said.

United States Department of Agriculture (U.S.D.A.) loans in process will not be able to go through until the shutdown comes to an end. "U.S.D.A. has run out of funds, leaving farmers without loans for rural development at this time. So if you have not received your loan to date, that would have to wait until after the shutdown," Ms. Plaskett said.

Air travel is going to be less secure because hundreds of Transportation Security Administration (T.S.A.) officers required to work without paychecks due to the partial government shutdown have been called out from work this week from at least four major airports," Ms. Plaskett said, quoting senior T.S.A. officials and three employee union officials.

The shutdown also affects the Coast Guard, inhibiting it from performing marina licensing, boater safety checks, enforcing fishing laws and drug enforcement in the U.S. Virgin Islands. "Training and maintenance has also been delayed for the Coast Guard," Ms. Plaskett said.

"F.B.I., D.E.A., C.B.P. and Air Traffic Control are all working right now. They will be working without pay very shortly. And FEMA will not be paid towards the end of January, which is very important for us here in the Virgin Islands as we're working feverishly towards our recovery efforts," Ms. Plaskett said.

To workaroud the shutdown, Ms. Plaskett said House Democrats have passed multiple appropriations bills to allow the opening of the federal government, "However the majority leader in the Senate, Mitch McConnell, has refused to put those bills on the floor," Ms. Plaskett said.

Asked if she supported border security, Ms. Plaskett gave a long explanation that spoke of Democrats efforts last year to compromise with the president, including to support Dreamers -- undocumented individuals residing in the U.S. who came with their parents as children -- but Mr. Trump refused those offers.

"The position that the Democratic Caucus has taken is that last year we offered the president much more funding than he's asking for now for border security, with a caveat that he makes an agreement with how to deal with the Dreamers, those students, those children, those young adults who were brought here by their parents without documentation," Ms. Plaskett said.

She added, "Many Virgin Islanders do not realize that there are Dreamers here in the Virgin Islands that need a way out. My office has dealt with students who are at UVI [the University of the Virgin Islands]. They came here with their parents from Montserrat, St. Kitts, other islands, Haiti, overstayed their visa or were not documented. We had a student who was at the University of the Virgin Islands and was a volleyball player and realized that she needed a passport to leave the Virgin Islands to come back to play with her team. It was then that they realized that she was an undocumented individual. We have a lot of those people that we have applied to be Dreamers, and those are contributing young Americans who do not know anywhere else and want a way out. We made that offer to the president last year, he rejected it."

Ms. Plaskett stressed that Democrats are in favor of border security, but not in the form of a wall. And she said Democrats are still perplexed as to why Americans should be paying for the wall, when throughout his campaign, Mr. Trump said it would be Mexico's bill.

"We are in favor of border security," she said. "In this last appropriation we gave money for 21st century border security, whether it's electronic surveillance, whether it's surveillance for an additional security law enforcement on the border, as well as having us do the soft democracy -- the things that would allow people not to feel threatened in their own countries. Whether it's Nicaragua, Guatemala or El Salvador... That meaning drugs, gang warfare, the turmoil that's causing so many people to come here. And so with that, those are the things that we're willing to support, not a fifth-century wall."

Ms. Plaskett said she was very concerned that FEMA workers would be furloughed, and said she would have discussions with FEMA Administration Brock Long and Governor Albert Bryan about the matter.