

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Vialet Calls On Bryan To Declare State Of Emergency In Light Of Surging Gun Violence In U.S. Virgin Islands

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Third-term St. Croix Senator Kurt Vialet has called on Governor Albert Bryan to declare a state of emergency in light of the surging gun violence in the U.S. Virgin Islands. Mr. Vialet's call for action comes as homicides on St. Croix have been surging from the onset of 2019, with the island experiencing five homicides in the first 17 days of the year. If this high rate of homicides per month were to hold until the end of 2019, St. Croix alone would experience 60 homicides. For a population of roughly 40,000, it would be the highest in the United States, and among the top worldwide for high homicide crime rate per capita.

Although there hasn't been homicide deaths in St. Thomas for the year, a recent shooting incident left three men wounded, an occurrence that could have easily turned deadly.

Mr. Violet called on Governor Bryan to declare the state of emergency and initiate a meeting with the Office of the Attorney General, judicial branch and all local and federal law enforcement agencies. The veteran senator also listed a number of objectives that should be up for discussion during the emergency meeting:

- Temporary reassignment of all Enforcement Officers to Department of Public Safety.
- Increased patrols and visibility in neighborhoods and towns.
- Increase traffic stops.
- Temporary hiring of off-island investigators to increase our investigative capabilities.
- Targeting of high crime areas by using data from shot spotter that record gunshots.
- Develop an enticement program for retired officers to return to duty for a time limited period.
- Establish Global Positioning Systems (GPS) in all police cars.
- Develop a system for citizens to anonymously report someone illegally possessing a firearm.
- Deter loitering in high crime areas and submit requisite legislative change to bolster the loitering law.
- Timely release of crime data (photos, color of car, description, etc.) that will assist in the identification of criminals by the community.
- Speedy prosecution of repeat offenders.
- Development of an anti-gang unit and reestablishment of the special unit.
- Resolution of outstanding cases that await trial.
- Development of a strategic plan to decrease violent crimes.

Currently, while Jason Marsh is serving as acting commissioner of the Virgin Islands Police Department, the Bryan administration has yet to announce a commissioner-designee, and gave no indication as to when an appointment would be made. To lead a successful effort in combating the wave of criminal activity marring the territory, government arms directly involved in such initiatives must have stable leadership. Also without an appointed leader from Mr. Bryan is the Department of Justice. (Following the resignation of Attorney General Claude Walker, former Governor Kenneth Mapp appointed Joseph Ponteene as a placeholder. Mr. Ponteene was subsequently [replaced](#) by the Bryan administration with Attorney Carol Thomas-Jacobs, who is serving as acting attorney general.) Many in the community have been calling on Mr. Bryan, who gave himself 90 days to fully name his cabinet, to appoint leadership to critical government departments like Justice and the V.I.P.D.

In his release, Mr. Violet also called on Mr. Bryan to expeditiously name a commissioner for the Police Department. "If we all remain silent it will only get worse," he said.

But while the administration agrees with the importance of naming department and agency heads, Communications Director Richard Motta told The Consortium this afternoon that Mr. Bryan was working "dutifully" to ascertain that the right persons fill such important positions.

The governor [on Thursday headed to Florida](#) with Department of Tourism Commissioner-designee Joseph Boschulte for meetings with cruise ship officials. He was scheduled to return today.

Other lawmakers also called for action. Senator Javan James, who heads the Senate Committee on Youth, Sports, Parks, and Recreation, called on the community to be more active in reporting suspected criminals. "I am calling upon our community to partner with the authorities by providing any information on the recent crimes which have been committed in the U.S. Virgin Islands," Mr. James said in a release issued today. "We are all in this together and we never know when it will be close to home. This is not a time to point fingers, but it is time for us to take back our community by doing our part as citizens and stakeholders and join forces with the Virgin Islands Police Department by gathering information to solve these crimes. At the same token, we must rebuild trust in our community by reassuring those witnesses who come forward that the source of information provided will be held in strict confidence."

At-Large Senator Steven Payne added, "All stakeholders in our communities must work together to curb the stream of violence that has been occurring within our territory."