

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Governor Bryan On Gun Violence: It's Time For Action

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Though we're in the 23rd day of January, five people had already lost their lives to gun violence in the U.S. Virgin Islands, more pointedly St. Croix, by January 17, and [three men had already been shot in St. Thomas](#) by Jan. 14, an incident that could have easily turned deadly. The year 2019 in the USVI relative to violent crime started out badly, then, and Governor Albert Bryan decided to address the surging situation during a joint press conference with V.I.P.D. officials on Tuesday.

During the press event, held at the V.I.P.D. headquarters in Frederiksted, Mr. Bryan - flanked by Acting Police Commissioner Jason Marsh and Acting St. Croix Police Chief Edmond Walters -- said it was time for action. (Former Territorial Police Chief Winsbut McFarlane resigned recently.)

"We've had studies, consent decrees, prayer vigils, but what we really need is action," the governor said. "Action on behalf of our community, action on behalf of our law enforcement, to make sure that the first priority of the police department and officials is that the people of the Virgin Islands are safe. Most of all I want to make sure that the community knows that even though this is a young administration, that the partnerships that we have been working on and creating among the police department and federal agencies and other law enforcement agencies is alive and well. It's a continuing process of making sure that our police department has equipment and resources, that they are properly trained. It's also to ensure that we continue the recruitment that we have done and further penetration into our communities that once again our community sees the Virgin Islands Police Department as a partner."

The governor said the V.I.P.D. was utilizing strategies that could not be talked about publicly to combat crime, and he said weapons were being taken off the streets -- three so far during his tenure -- with initiatives such as traffic stops. Asked by The Consortium whether there were fresh ideas as part of the new administration being implemented, Mr. Bryan said he would speak in detail on such matters during his State of the Territory



Acting Police Commissioner Jason Marsh

The Consortium also asked Mr. Bryan about residents' apprehension in relaying information to law enforcement, based on a mistrust, whether warranted or misguided, that has caused a lot of cases to go cold. To this, the governor said his administration would make use of the territory's witness protection program.

"We had a crime bill pass that actually set aside monies for the witness protection program," Mr. Bryan said. "We intend on repopulating that so we can assist residents to remain safe once they choose to testify. We understand that it is a small community, and we found this strategy to be successful in the past, and we're going to employ it going into the future," the governor said.

The governor did not, however, address the underlying problem, which is Virgin Islanders' fear in sharing information with police based on a mistrust that has persisted over the years -- the fear that if they were to provide information, say for example on a homicide, that they too might wind up dead. It is a major challenge for the V.I.P.D. that has caused many cases to languish cold.

Mr. Bryan condemned the high level of crime as unacceptable, and said there must be a comprehensive plan in place not only to quell the gone violence with ramped up help from federal partners, but to get to the root of the issue, which the governor said included

the "persistent problems of poverty in our community, joblessness and hopelessness among our youth."

The chief executive also sought to boost law enforcement officials by expressing his total confidence in their ability to do their jobs.

"I have full confidence in the men and women in the Virgin Islands Police Department, and [I] ask that you too as members of our community participate in the active investigations," he said. "We have lost so many of our friends, neighbors, our family members to gun violence and other violence in this community, and while we are working hard to equip the Virgin Islands Police Department with the resources and equipment that they need to solve these crimes, we also are making a plea on behalf of the families, as well as the Virgin Islands Police Department, that you too are to participate in bringing this crime spate to an end."

The work of change will not be easy, though. "It will take courage and painstaking measures to make these changes," Mr. Bryan said. But with the help of federal partners, with whom this administration has held several conversations, according to the governor, the intention is "to end gun violence and take guns off the street in our communities."

To that end, Mr. Bryan said the V.I.P.D. will continue its random stops, and the administration plans on announcing a firearms amnesty program, where those in possession of guns illegally will be able to bring the weapons in with no questions asked.

The governor also placed as acting police chief in the St. Thomas-St. John District Steven Phillips.