

Pre-Flight Testing Would Help Contain Coronavirus, Bryan Says as USVI Eyes Mid-Sept. Reopening for Leisure Travelers

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Governor Albert Bryan believes pre-departure testing at mainland U.S. airports as well as increased adherence to public health protocols would bolster the efficacy of efforts to contain the spread of novel coronavirus both locally and throughout the Caribbean, said a release issued by the V.I. Dept. of Tourism on a Wednesday meeting of Caribbean Hotel and Tourism Association (CHTA) members.

Titled “Caribbean Tourism Fireworks”, the discussion was hosted by Frank Comito, CEO and director general of the private sector hospitality association. During the meeting, Mr. Bryan is said to have stated that mandatory preflight testing would make travel to the Caribbean healthier and easier.

Reporting on meetings held earlier this week with St. Lucia Prime Minister Allen Chastanet, the governor said they agreed on the need for the rollout of rapid test technology to protect Caribbean visitors and residents. They also recalled the tragic events of September 11, which killed some 3,000 souls and led to the establishment of the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) and federal security measures to ensure the attacks could never recur. At the same time, the two leaders lamented the fact that COVID-19 has so far led to the deaths of more than 150,000 people in the United States alone, but effective, universal travel protocols have yet to be put in place to contain the pandemic, according the Dept. of Tourism.

According to D.O.T., the territory's chief executive said he welcomed conversations with other Caribbean heads of government to consider standardized public health protocols: "We have a real symbiotic relationship here in the Caribbean and it looks like we are going to work closer together to take care of Caribbean tourism," Mr. Bryan is said to have stated.

The release stated that recent increases in community spread in the USVI are being attributed to asymptomatic Virgin Islanders who live and work abroad returning for family events and unknowingly infecting friends and family members in close-knit communities, particularly on St. Thomas. According to the release, Mr. Bryan noted that while the overwhelming majority of residents have been complying with the territory's pandemic protocols and guidelines, "familiarity lessens [adherence to] restrictions", and he reported stronger communications tactics will be deployed to remind residents the pandemic "does not take prisoners".

While a significant portion of the tourism sector has not fully reopened since the 2017 hurricanes, Mr. Bryan noted that the closures have given resorts time to upgrade, refurbish and refresh their properties. In fact, prior to the pandemic, the USVI's tourism sector had been recovering well with hotel bookings and villa and charter rentals "going through the roof," the governor reported, according to D.O.T.

Tax abatements and other economic incentives have also boosted investment interest in the private sector while the government completes infrastructural projects to enhance the attractiveness of the territory and make it easier to travel around the islands, Tourism said.

With a rise in positive COVID-19 cases in prisons and senior citizen residential facilities, D.O.T. said every effort is being made to increase rapid testing, including testing at airports and throughout the community as the destination counts down to its planned reopening to leisure travelers in mid-September.

The territory's earlier problems with the availability and expense of needed equipment have been addressed successfully, and the price of testing has been reduced from \$150 to somewhere between \$30 and \$50, D.O.T. said.

According to the release, the governor said the islands' current month-long pause on welcoming leisure visitors will be used to strengthen existing containment measures and to invite U.S. stateside doctors and nurses to share their expertise and tithe their time at local medical facilities.

Despite his optimistic outlook and expectation of recovery for anyone who contracts the virus, Mr. Bryan, according to D.O.T., expressed his personal sorrow over every new case detected, whether in the U.S. Virgin Islands, the Caribbean or anywhere in the world.