

The Virgin Islands Consortium

USVI Workers Who Lost Jobs After Hurricanes Irma & Maria Granted 30-Day Extension To Apply For Disaster Unemployment Assistance

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The U.S. Virgin Islands Department of Labor last week [announced](#) that workers who lost their jobs as a result of Hurricanes Irma or Maria have been granted a 30-day extension of the deadline to file for up to 52 weeks of federally-funded Disaster Unemployment Assistance (DUA), the National Employment Law Project, announced Monday. NELP is a non-partisan, nonprofit organization that conducts research and advocates on issues affecting low-wage and unemployed workers.

The DUA program provides unemployment benefits to individuals who have become unemployed as a direct result of a presidentially-declared major disaster. The prior deadline of July 31st has now been extended to August 30th.

More than a year after Hurricanes Irma and Maria devastated the U.S. Virgin Islands, Congress enacted a special extension of the DUA program, providing up to 26 additional weeks of DUA for workers who exhaust their regular unemployment benefits or their standard 26 weeks of DUA; individuals who previously failed to apply for DUA for legitimate reasons may apply for up to 52 weeks of DUA, NELP said. All eligible workers are strongly encouraged to apply, including those who were self-employed at the time of the storms and the large numbers of workers who collected regular unemployment benefits.

The new DUA benefits enacted by Congress in 2018 are available to workers who were unemployed as a direct result of Hurricanes Irma and Maria anytime between September 20, 2017 and September 22, 2018. Thus, the program is not limited to people who are currently unemployed. DUA benefits will be paid in the form of a retroactive, lump-sum check.

The minimum DUA benefit in the U.S. Virgin Islands is \$170 per week, and the maximum benefit is \$552 per week (the [average worker](#) collects \$339 per week). In the typical case of a worker who collected \$339 a week in regular unemployment benefits for 26 weeks after the storms, her or she will be entitled to an extra payment 26 weeks of DUA at the same weekly benefit level, which comes to over \$8,800 paid retroactively.

The special DUA program was first [announced](#) by the Virgin Islands Department of Labor on March 25, 2019. The original May 24th filing deadline was [extended to July 31st](#) in response to a request by the Virgin Islands to federal authorities. The Virgin Islands has not reported data indicating the number of people who have collected DUA since the new program was announced.

However, the National Employment Law Project (NELP) estimates that 1,000 to 1,500 people (or roughly 10 percent of the population) reached the end of their regular unemployment insurance benefits in the U.S. Virgin Islands after the storms. Just accounting for those who ran out of their regular unemployment benefits (thus not including those who collected DUA after the storms), more than \$8 million in DUA benefits may be available in \$8,800 payments to 1,000 Virgin Islands workers and self-employed business owners.

“The Virgin Islands did the right thing extending the DUA filing deadline to August 30th to ensure that all workers who qualify can access the federal program,” said Maurice Emsellem, program director at NELP. “Now is the time for the Virgin Islands Labor Department to seriously boost the numbers of people applying, which requires publicizing the program in a bigger way and streamlining the application process.”

For more information about the special DUA program, see the Virgin Islands [fact sheet](#) developed by [NELP](#). To apply for the benefits, individuals may call Virgin Islands Department of Labor at 340-715-5712 and visit their website (<https://www.vidol.gov/>).