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With Many Virgin Islanders Still Not Receiving Unemployment Benefits, Dept. of Labor Says it Will Start In-Person Service in Two Weeks

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Serious Afro-Caribbean mid-adult man looking through a window from his kitchen. Many Virgin Islanders, unemployed for months because of Covid-19, have hit even harder times as the Dept. of Labor has failed to adequately serve residents. By. iStock/VICONSORTIUM

The V.I. Department of Labor, under pressure as residents continue to complain about the difficulty in reaching the department for assistance, said it would start some in-person service in two weeks. According to Labor Commissioner Gary Molloy, the change in strategy is due to Covid-19 positive cases trending down in the territory, and new technology.

He said his "protectiveness" of Labor employees relative to how the department has interacted with the community has been based on Covid-19 guidelines, including social distancing. Mr. Molloy has directed Labor employees not address and serve residents standing outside the department's offices. Employees who disregard the directive could be written up, a Labor employee at the St. Croix office told the Consortium.

Hundreds of Virgin Islanders have shared their stories with the Consortium, most via [this post](#) on our Facebook platform, but many through phone calls, including a great many who have yet to receive a single unemployment check from the department.

On Monday, speaking during the Bryan administration's weekly Covid-19 response update, Mr. Molloy said residents would see some in-person services to help speed up the process for persons seeking unemployment benefits, including unemployment insurance payments for gig workers and the self-employed — a program the department has struggled to rollout.

"With the [Covid-19] numbers being down, we're going to shift to a service and delivery method that you're going to see this month that will involve more in-person contact," Mr. Molloy said. "What we will be doing is looking at it from the standpoint operating like a takeout delivery, where we already have the buzzer system in place."

Mr. Molloy said the in-person strategy will be setup on different days of the week to control the flow of claimants seeking help, and the community will be made aware of the rollout, which he said on Monday would be in two weeks.

The commissioner also said the department now has technology that will enable it to help residents with specific claim issues. He said claimants will be issued a specific PIN number that can be entered into the department's VIDOL system, which then provides the claimant with information relative to the issue and the remedy thereof. "Just the way you would be able to call in to a bank and get some information, you will be able to find out about the check issue date, the check amount, about the beginning of your benefit year and the ending of your benefit year," he said.

The commissioner has come under fire as residents have been unrelenting about the department's unresponsiveness at a time when Virgin Islanders have been struggling. Mr. Molloy reiterated on Monday that Labor has struggled to answer phone calls because of the high volume, with 232,000 calls coming in between July and September to the St. Croix office alone. Pressed by the Consortium on whether the department should hire additional employees to help with the workload, the commissioner did not commit to additional hires. Instead, he spoke of the new strategy of in-person service and technology that he said would help claimants with specific issues.

Late last month, a D.O.L. employee, speaking on the condition anonymity, [told this publication](#) that the department was critically understaffed and employees had reached a breaking point.