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Dept. of Labor to Become More 'Customer-Centric' With In-Person Service Commencing the Week of Oct. 26

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Dept. of Labor headquarters on St. Croix. By. VI CONSORTIUM

The VI Department of Labor said this week that as part of its fiscal year 2021 plan, it would become "more customer-centric" with a variety of services aimed at better helping Virgin Islanders with unemployment claims. The move follows nonstop criticism of the department's handling of the deployment of unemployment insurance and how Virgin Islanders have been treated. Labor Commissioner Molloy had halted in-person service, blaming the pandemic, and thousands of calls were going unanswered, frustrating further unemployed residents struggling to make ends meet.

Even so, the department has had some wins, delivering upwards of \$32.7 million in regular unemployment benefits as of Monday, and more than \$42.6 million in Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation payments. Where D.O.L. has struggled the most is with the Federal Unemployment Assistance Program, which provides gig economy workers and the self-employed with unemployment payments. The Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation program has also been slow to come online with only \$1.7 million in payments as of Monday.

"Earlier this year, the VIDOL had to alter its service delivery to online applications, telephone, and drop box alternatives to adhere to the safety guidelines brought on by COVID-19," said the department in a release. "Similar to many states, the VIDOL encountered a tremendous volume of claims and incoming calls."

The department said that effective the week of October 26, it "has added to its mission for FY2021 to be more customer-centric". As part of this new, friendlier Dept. of Labor, the following services will be available:

- Implementing an automated system so claimants with UI claims can call into the Interactive Voice Response (IVR) system utilize the PIN provided to find out information about your specific claims. All claimants will receive a PIN in the mail and will be able to call (340)-715-5744 to check the status and payment information about your claim.
- Staff will be administering services to claimants in-person at both locations on St. Thomas and St. Croix by the last name on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays between the hours of 9 am-4 pm utilizing a takeout delivery concept as individuals will be registered and given a buzzer to wait in their vehicle or designated waiting for the area until their turn. At this time resource rooms will not be accessible. The schedule will be based on the last name as follows: Tuesdays A- H; Wednesdays I -P; and Thursdays Q-Z.

D.O.L said it anticipates that these new service and delivery practices will help to better connect clients with the services needed and it will support claimant information accessibility as the territory continues to implement measures to safeguard against COVID-19.