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Thanksgiving is Upon Us, D.O.H. Provides 23 Covid-19 Safety Guidelines

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Thanksgiving is one of the most cherished holidays in America, as it brings family and friends together to catch up and reminisce, while dining on once-a-year cuisine.

The tradition is also very mushy with lots of hugging and friendly kisses.

This year, the V.I. Dept. of Health is urging residents to be more mindful as Covid-19 could spread easily in such settings. D.O.H. Territorial Epidemiologist, Dr. Esther Ellis, on Monday provided the community with some guidelines to follow while celebrating:

- Remind guests to stay home if they are sick or if they have been exposed to Covid-19 in the last 14 days, or are showing symptoms

- Anyone who has had close contact with a person who has had Covid-19 should stay home and monitor their health
- Keep a list of guests who attended for potential future contact tracing needs
- Host your gathering outdoors, when possible. However, if this is not feasible, make sure the room or space is well-ventilated
- Arrange tables and chairs to allow for social distancing
- If planning activities for adults and/or children, consider those where social distancing can be maintained
- When guest arrive, minimize gestures that promote close contact
- Wear a mask when less than six (6) feet apart from people or indoors.
- Consider providing masks to the guest or ask them to bring their own
- Consider providing hand sanitizer in addition to clearly marked hand washing areas, encourage guests to also bring their own.
- Wash your hands for at least 20 seconds when entering and exiting social gatherings.
- Make sure there is adequate soap or hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol available in the restrooms
- Provide cleaning supplies that allow guest to wipe down surfaces before they leave
- Remind guests to wash their hands before serving or eating food
- Use single-use towels or paper towels for drying hands, so guest do not share a towel
- Limit the number of people handling or serving food
- Limit people going in and out of the areas where food is being prepared or handled.
- If serving any food, consider identifying one person to serve all food so that multiple people are not handling the serving utensils
- Use single-use options or identify one person to serve sharable items so that multiple people are not handling the items.
- Limit contact with commonly touched surfaces or shared items and use touchless garbage cans if possible
- Use gloves when removing garbage bags or handling and disposing of trash. Wash hand after removing gloves
- Clean and disinfect commonly touched surfaces and any shared items between use when feasible
- If you chose to use any shared items that are reusable, such as seating covers, table cloths, and linen napkins, wash, clean, and sanitize them after the event.

Community members who need assistance in safely organizing their events should email D.O.H.'s Environmental Health Division at inspection.deh@doh.vi.gov.

In addition to people attending parties and gatherings locally, residents will also be traveling abroad to the mainland for weekend trips. "It is critical that residents who travel follow the travel guidelines," said Dr. Ellis.

As cases continue to rise both nationally and locally, Commissioner of Health Justa Encarnacion has discouraged residents from nonessential travel. Dr. Ellis echoed those sentiments Monday during the Bryan administration's Covid-19 response update. "Travel increases your chances of getting Covid-19; staying home is still the best way to protect yourself and others," she said.

While residents are discouraged from nonessential travel, some individuals who must travel for essential reasons are encouraged to visit usviupdate.com for travel requirements.

Dr. Ellis highlighted in her report that all travelers to the territory age 5 and above must use the travel portal at usvitravelportal.com before coming to the USVI. They also must provide a negative PCR test taken within five days before travel. Also accepted are positive Covid-19 antibody tests taken within four months prior to travel. This goes for both residents and visitors alike, however, children age 4 or younger are exempted from the testing requirements.

During the briefing, Dr. Ellis also addressed the distribution of Covid-19 vaccines. Earlier Monday, Moderna, an American biotechnology company based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, released data from its vaccine test results. The company said trials proved to be 94.5 percent effective.

"The overall effectiveness has been remarkable... it's a great day," said Tal Zaks, the chief medical officer at Moderna. Dr. Stephen Hoge, the company's president, said, "I don't think any of us really hoped that the vaccine would be 94 percent effective at preventing Covid-19 disease; that was really a stunning realization."

Moderna's results come just a week after Pfizer and BioNTech announced that their preliminary data from ongoing Phase 3 clinical trials showed their vaccine to be 90 percent effective. According to a BBC article, Moderna's vaccine seems to be easier to store since it remains stable at minus 20C for up to six months and can be kept in a standard fridge for up to a month. Compared to the Moderna, the Pfizer vaccine will need to be stored in an ultra-cold freezer at around minus 75 Celcius and can only be kept in a fridge for five days.

Dr. Ellis stated that the USVI has been looking at both vaccine options, stating that the territory has the capacity to store the Pfizer vaccine, however, the Pfizer vaccine has to be transported on dry ice to providers since not all providers may have the proper means of storing the vaccine.

Relative to a timeline, Dr. Ellis said the USVI will receive the Covid-19 vaccine [at the same time with U.S. states](#).

Medicare Advantage Plan

Dayna Clendinen, director of the Division of Personnel, presented information to all government retirees about their Medicare Advantage Plan, which will be transitioned beginning January 1. Retirees should receive a new United Healthcare Advantage card the first week in December.

Benefits to retirees under the new plan include:

- \$0 co-pay for all doctor visits
- \$0 deductible
- \$500 allowance for vision and hearing aid exams
- Free virtual consultations with nurses 24 hours a day, seven days a week
- Free access to fitness centers or gyms
- Gift reward cards for house calls, such as virtual preventative checkups

Under the new plan, Medicare Part D prescription coverage remains unchanged.

Ms. Clendinen also spoke about the mass-mailing of a coupon book and a 2021 premium about the AARP Medicare Supplement Plan. She made clear that unless a person has an individual health care plan with AARP, the letter and coupon book can be disregarded.

Additionally, Ms. Clendinen stated that while the United HealthCare plan transitions to the GVI Medicare Advantage Plan, beneficiaries might receive a termination notice. Nevertheless, that does not mean those beneficiaries have lost coverage.

For more information about the GVI Group Medicare Advantage Plan, call the Personnel Division at 340-774-8588 or 340-718-8588 or contact United HealthCare at 866-827-9022 or visit uhcvirtualretiree.com/gvi.

Unemployment

- As of November 15, the Virgin Islands Department of Labor has received 16,952 applications for unemployment benefits and has processed 15,801 of those applications.
- To date, the Virgin Islands Department of Labor (VIDOL) has issued 45,883 unemployment insurance checks totaling more than \$36,000,420.
- The department also has issued an additional 28,096 Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation checks totaling \$43,407,300.
- VIDOL has issued 4,299 Pandemic Unemployment Assistance checks to self-employed Virgin Islanders totaling \$7,198,932 and \$2,413,449 in Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation.
- In total, the Bryan-Roach Administration has issued 79,691 checks totaling \$89,020,101.

Stimulus

- The Bureau of Internal Revenue (BIR) and the Department of Finance began issuing the latest batch of CARES Act stimulus payments on November 10: 2,923 checks totaling \$4 million.
- The BIR and the Department of Finance have processed \$82,602,604 in CARES payments to 50,636.
- The Bureau of Internal Revenue has extended the deadline to file a 2018 income tax return or form 1040 to receive a stimulus check to November 21. The Bureau will continue to make payments until December 31, 2020.

Virtual Learning

Presently, according to the V.I. Department of Education's existing school and district inventory, the department has issued:

- 2,000 MiFi Devices (1,00 per district)
- 1,475 Laptops in St. Croix District
- 310 Laptops in St. Thomas/St. John District

D.O.E. has purchased 12,000 Chromebooks for students with the funding provided by Congress under the CARES Act, though most of them had yet to arrive. As of Thursday, November 12, the department had distributed.

- Chromebooks 997 in the St. Croix District
- Chromebooks 670 in St. Thomas/St. John District.

D.O.E. said it would continue the issuance of Chromebooks as soon as the vendor fulfills the book orders.

COVID-19 cases

- Currently tracking 40 active cases.
- 26,110 individuals tested to date (more than 25% of the population)
- 24,635 of those tests were negative
- 1,434 tests came back positive
- 1,370 people have recovered
- 23 fatalities to date
- No COVID-19 patients are hospitalized at Juan F. Luis Hospital on St. Croix.
- One COVID-19 patient is hospitalized at Schneider Regional Medical Center on St. Thomas.