The Virgin Islands Consortium

Agreement on $900 Billion Covid-19 Package Reached, Providing $600 for Individuals, Including Virgin Islanders, and $600 Per Child

Coronavirus / **Published On December 20, 2020 08:09 PM /**

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Congress has reached an agreement on the $900 billion coronavirus relief package that will bring much-needed aid to Americans in the form of direct stimulus checks and enhanced unemployment insurance, among other relief. The U.S. Virgin Islands and other U.S. territories stand to benefit equally with their U.S. mainland counterparts in the deal, whose contents will be bundled with a spending bill Congress was set to approve before midnight — the new deadline to fund the government through 2021.

When the final House and Senate votes will come remained uncertain at time of writing. However, U.S. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell called for swift action on the plan.

The agreement comes after months of stalemate between Republicans and Democrats over spending priorities. Two problematic issues kept the parties from reaching common ground in the past: Republicans wanted liability protections for businesses, the reach of which Democrats opposed, and Democrats wanted funding for state and local governments, which Republicans contended not all states needed.

To make progress, both parties agreed to leave said items out of the current package while focusing on other important areas. The $900 billion includes $300 a week in enhanced unemployment insurance through March 14, funding for small businesses, schools, health care providers, among other relief measures. The agreement also extends two additional unemployment programs through April 4.

Additionally, the latest measure includes funding for rental assistance and vaccine distribution.

Relative to direct payments to Americans (including Virgin Islanders), the amount is expected to be $600 per adult and $600 per child. The stimulus payments phase out for individuals making $75,000 annually, and $150,000 for couples.

According to the Wall Street Journal, citing someone familiar with the discussions, the direct stimulus payments plan includes eligibility for partial payments to "mixed-status households", described as a home where some individuals have Social Security numbers while others don't. Similarly to the first stimulus package, dependents over the age of 16 would not qualify. Lawmakers had pleaded for the inclusion of this category, as it would provide the financial benefit for college students and disabled adults.

Additionally, the funding provides $277 billion for small businesses through the Paycheck Protection Program, which is the bulk of the $325 billion funding allocated to small businesses as part of the package.

Elsewhere in the agreement, $15 billion goes toward airline payroll support, and lawmakers were finalizing discussions surrounding the limits and timeframe placed on a temporary increase in food-stamp benefits.

The compromise between Republicans and Democrats takes into consideration the continued surge in virus cases and deaths, which has caused additional business closures and unemployment to increase. "We're not leaving here without a Covid package," said Mr. McConnell Tuesday, the powerful Senate Majority leader. "No matter how long it takes, we'll be here."

The latest agreement is up from the $500 billion Republicans had originally envisioned, and down from the $2.4 trillion Democrats had lobbied for, resulting in a classic case of compromise on Capitol Hill.

The direct payments to Virgin Islanders will be distributed locally by the Bureau of Internal Revenue. B.I.R. had faced criticism after it took several months for Virgin Islanders to receive the payments.