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USVI Residents to Receive Larger Stimulus, Extended Rent Moratorium, and Extended Unemployment Benefits in Biden's Coronavirus Relief Package

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President-elect Joe Biden on Thursday unveiled his \$1.9 trillion Covid-19 relief package.
By. ALEX WONG / GETTY IMAGES

The Virgin Islands people along with the territory's government stand to gain millions of dollars as part of President-elect Joe Biden's coronavirus relief package. For the government, tens of millions of dollars in funding to help with economic losses from coronavirus-induced restrictions, and for residents, more stimulus dollars — larger than the latest \$600 per adult approved by outgoing President Donald Trump in December, and the first stimulus passed in March that provided each adult with \$1,200.

Mr. Biden's plan calls for \$1,400 per-person direct payments to most households. It expands unemployment to \$400 a week and extends the benefit through September. The bill increases the child tax credit and extends paid leave. The rest of the \$1.9 trillion package sees most of the funding going to vaccine distribution and funding for states and U.S. territories.

Unveiling his plan on Thursday, Mr. Biden stressed the urgency to take deliberate action. "We have to act and we have to act now," he said.

Mr. Biden will be sworn in as the nation's 46th president on Wednesday with a majority in both the House of Representatives and the upper chamber, the U.S. Senate. But his margin in the Senate is razor-thin at 50-50, with Vice President-elect Kamala Harris serving as the tie breaker in Democrats' favor. The narrow majority means Democrats must convince at least 10 Republicans to join them in overcoming procedural hurdles.

In the House, the margin for Democrats is larger but still thin: 222 to Republicans' 211 seats. These results mean Mr. Biden's broad agenda will still be difficult to push through, especially the more controversial items such as immigration reform, taxes and spending.

Under the president-elect's plan, the child tax credit would grow from \$2,000 to \$3,000, and would include an additional \$600 for children under 6 years old. A new rule introduced in Mr. Biden's plan would allow the poorest families to get the full benefit. For families struggling with rent — many as a result of work stoppage ordered by governments to combat the Covid-19 pandemic — the Biden plan includes such funding. "I believe we have a moral obligation. In this pandemic in America, we cannot let people go hungry. We cannot let people get evicted," he said.

State and local governments would finally get what they've been calling for: substantial funding to help bolster their local treasuries stretched as a result of the pandemic, with the Biden plan providing \$350 billion to that end.

Mr. Biden has stated on the record his support for loan forgiveness, at least the plan that sees \$10,000 being forgiven. However, his current proposal does not include this item, with Mr. Biden embracing a plan that extends student loan forbearance, allowing students to temporarily pause loan payments.

Mr. Biden's big focus is vaccine distribution, and his plan includes the administration of 100 million vaccine doses in his first 100 days as president. The plan, though bold, is needed: According to Johns Hopkins University, the U.S. recorded more than 3,700 fatalities on Thursday, and to date, the country has had more than 390,000 fatalities linked to the pathogen.

Centers for Diseases Control and Prevention officials said Friday that 11.1 million Americans had received doses of either the Moderna or Pfizer vaccine as of Thursday, with more than 1.1 million of the total being second doses. The urgency is amplified because new Covid-19 strains, the first, the U.K. strain [which is already in the U.S.](#), is said to be 50 percent more contagious, and the other, [the South African variant](#), more resistant against vaccines.

USVI health officials said they were monitoring the U.K. variant. "The U.S. Virgin Islands Department of Health is sending samples to the CDC for sequencing to determine if and when the variant is detected here as well," said Dr. Esther Ellis, D.O.H.'s territorial epidemiologist, during the Bryan administration's Covid-19 press briefing Thursday. "These recent events are alarming and could have real impacts in the Virgin Islands, in which we have seen [cases increasing significantly](#)."

Pfizer said the vaccines protect against the U.K. variant, however, to beat the virulent disease, 80 percent of the U.S. population would need to be vaccinated, CDC scientists say — 10 percent higher than some federal officials had anticipated.

Mr. Biden's plan seeks \$160 billion in funding as part of a national vaccination program that would extend testing and create a public health jobs program to recruit the workforce needed to power the president's vision. This plan would also see vaccination sites being erected across the nation and U.S. territories. Mr. Biden's team has said the plan would solve the supply shortage issue faced in some U.S. jurisdictions, and work to diminish the disparities such as equitable distribution of the vaccines.

A big question is how fast will Mr. Biden's plan will be approved in the new Congress. Looking at precedent takes us back to the George W. Bush era, when the Republicans controlled the Senate by default because the body was split 50-50, and Vice President Dick Cheney served as the tie breaker in Republicans' favor. Back then, in January 2021, Mr. Bush sought big tax cuts, but that measure did not arrive to his desk until June of that year. And while the first coronavirus relief package approved in March was a bipartisan effort that sped through Congress at the beginning of the pandemic, the next package, which was much smaller, took months of back and forth before lawmakers ultimately arrived at a compromise.