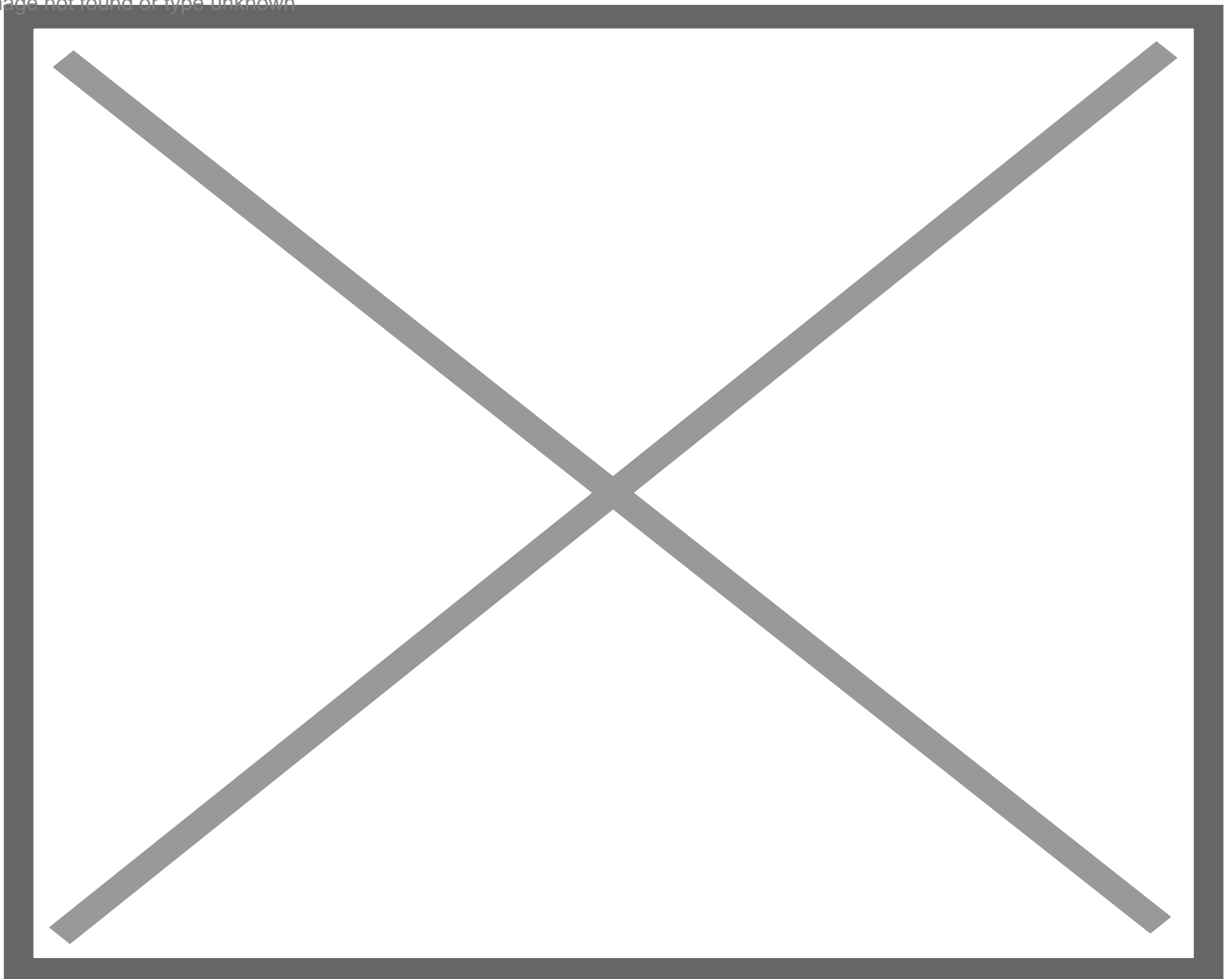


Low-Income Workers Should Be Priority of \$40 Million in Stimulus Checks, Rule Book Says; Gittens Challenges Notion That People Making Over \$70,000 Don't Qualify

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Guidelines created by Democrats in Congress and the Biden administration and issued by the U.S. Treasury relative to how funds from the American Rescue Plan Act should be spent, require local governments to prioritize low-income workers for stimulus check payments, according to Senator Kenneth Gittens, who read a portion of the guidelines during a Senate hearing Friday.

Each U.S. state, territory and tribal government will receive their portion of the \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan Act, or ARPA, which includes an amount for Premium Pay stimulus checks. The U.S. Virgin Islands was allocated \$547.1 million from ARPA, and as of Wednesday

the territory was in receipt of \$531 million. For the Premium Pay program, \$40 million was set aside for Virgin Islands private and public sector employees who qualify for the one-time payment.

All the funds are sitting in the territory's two major banks, First Bank and Banco Popular, according to Governor Albert Bryan. On Monday, Mr. Bryan told the Consortium that the 437-page rule book on how to spend the money was only published by the U.S. Treasury on January 6.

“Mr. chair, under the eligible uses for the Premium Pay it simply states, and I quote, that the interim final rule emphasizes the need for recipients, meaning the government, to prioritize Premium Pay for lower-income workers,” Mr. Gittens said.

Even so, the senator believes that the Office of Management and Budget was incorrect when its director [announced](#) that workers who earn more than \$70,000 would not qualify for the one-time payment to be provided to those who had to continue working despite the Covid-19 pandemic.

“I don’t think that the government side has that totally correct as that will now mean that half the Police Department, our police officers, and maybe our registered nurses and doctors will not even qualify for this,” said Mr. Gittens on Friday while questioning management personnel from the territory's hospitals during a meeting of the Committee on Health, Hospitals & Human Services.

“So, I will caution the government and have them look at the guidelines from the U.S. Department of Treasury,” he said while sharing with committee members a direct quote from the rules as established by the U.S. Treasury.

Mr. Gittens added, “It goes on to say that if the Premium Pay would increase a worker’s total pay above 150 percent or greater, or the state of the country’s average annual wage, it simply requires justification, specific justification for how it responds to the needs of these workers.”

“So, this does not say if you make above \$70,000 that you will not qualify,” said Mr. Gittens as he spoke directly to healthcare workers during the committee hearing. [There](#), leaders of the Juan F. Luis Hospital and the Schneider Regional Medical Center presented an overview on their operations, infrastructure, staffing levels, status of the Intensive Care Units, surgical suites and patient discharge policies.

Governor Bryan on Monday [spoke about the stimulus](#) to the Consortium. “We have prioritized money to make direct payments to people because we know people in the community have been adversely impacted by Covid,” he said. “It's actually for people that have worked directly with the public.”

Mr. Bryan mentioned funding [going out at the end of January](#) to school lunch employees as an example of what to expect.

“All those people in our community like tellers, grocery store workers, restaurant workers — all the people who couldn't stay home during the pandemic — police officers, nurses. Of course there are guidelines on how we distribute any compensation, but those people who had to go out and work when everybody else stayed home, we're looking to see how we could reward those people,” he said.

Mr. Gittens informed testifiers that he had submitted legislation directing funding from the Covid-19 Premium Pay to essential employees. He said after hearing the response from the government following the Jan. 12 meeting in the Committee on Disaster Recovery and Infrastructure, “I have

since reached out to a number of agencies with regards to the first responders and our healthcare workers and we are working towards that end."

During the Jan. 12 meeting, Jenifer O'Neal, director of the V.I. Office of Management and Budget told Mr. Gittens in response to his question about the number of people who are expected to benefit from the \$40 million in Premium Pay payouts, that not all essential public sector workers would receive the stimulus.

"For the public sector employees and actually private sector as well, the Premium Pay is a one-time payment that is based on guidelines established by Treasury; you cannot go over a certain amount. If you make more than \$70,000 you cannot qualify to receive any Premium Pay at all," she said.

Ms. O'Neal explained that her office would follow the guidelines as established by the Treasury Department. "There are some salary guidelines that we have to bear in mind and it is a onetime payment that will be done," she said. "We will provide the plan once it is complete to this body but we do have specific guidelines that we have to follow once it is Premium Pay, and we will continue to read through the 437-page rule document to make sure that we stay in compliance with treasury."