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Plaskett Says \$40 Million in Stimulus Payments Not Limited to Those Making \$70,000 or Less

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Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett has said she does not believe that the \$40 million in stimulus payments for employees both private and public who worked throughout the pandemic is limited to those making \$70,000 or less, stating that such a restriction would hurt those who supported the territory the most during the pandemic.

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 January the territory was in receipt of \$531 million. For the Premium Pay program, \$40 million was set aside for the Virgin Islands.

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

Bryan administration officials have said the Premium Pay funding can only be provided to private and public employees making \$70,000 or less annually.

"I do not have an understanding that there are those types of restrictions and I know that my legislative director is interested in meeting with the governor's counsel about where they came up with this, because I know that there's tremendous leeway in the funding for this, and there may be other ways to enhance the support for those that are working on the frontlines," Ms. Plaskett said in response to a Consortium question Monday night about the Premium Pay program. Ms. Plaskett held a Pen and Pad meeting with journalists following Mr. Bryan's address.

The congresswoman recalled her father and grandfather, both of whom were police officers, and how overtime work enhanced their salaries. She also mentioned nurses as being in a similar category. "That's where they get those bumps in pay, and so we don't want to penalize them for having done tremendous work during the time when we needed them the most. Patrolling our beaches, supporting the V.I. National Guard and others, and so we're looking to see if the governor is amenable if they really do believe that there's some sort of cap on that, to asking the administration and others how it can provide some leeway and to give them that funding," said Ms. Plaskett.

During a Jan. 12 hearing in the Office of Disaster Recovery and Infrastructure, Jenifer O'Neal, director of the V.I. Office of Management and Budget told Senator Kenneth Gittens in response to his question about the number of people who are expected to benefit from the \$40 million, that not all essential 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."

Mr. Gittens maintains a differing opinion on the matter. "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," the senator [said on Jan. 15](#) 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 added.

Regarding distribution of the funds, Ms. O'Neal said, “The realistic time for at least the public sector workers will be around sometime in February. Private sector workers will be a little bit longer because we do need to collect the information from the private sector in order to have that information to provide the funding,” Ms. O'Neal said while explaining that payments for private sector employees will be around March.

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