

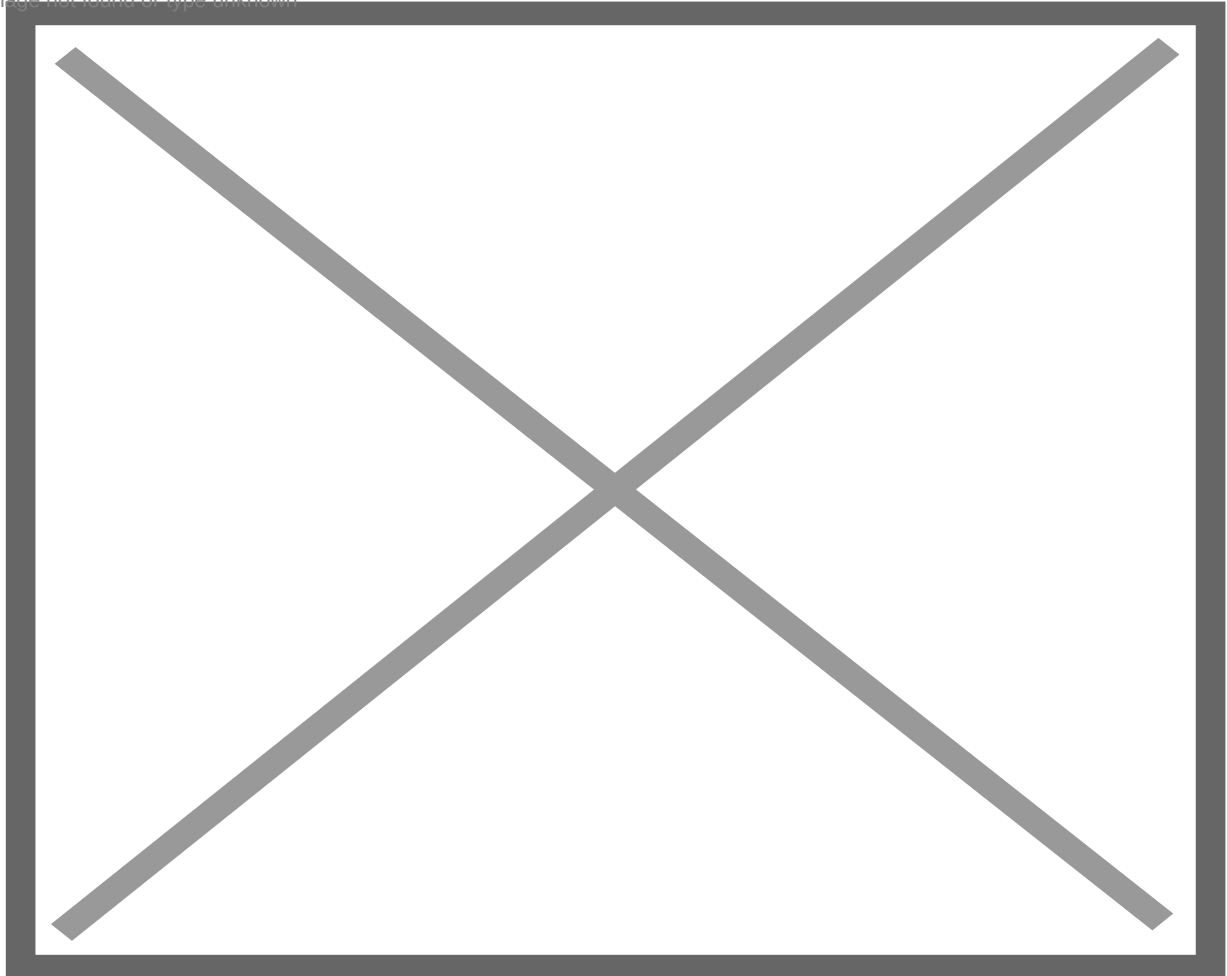
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Biden Heralds New Phase in Fight Against Covid-19: No Masks, Open Schools and In-Person Work

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President Joe Biden used his first State of the Union address to give the American public and the world a clear understanding of his agenda. The first 15 minutes of the speech was dedicated to the war in Ukraine as Mr. Biden stood staunchly with the Ukrainians and announced that America and its allies would continue exacting crippling sanctions on Moscow. To that end, Mr. Biden announced that Russian aircraft would be banned from America's airspace.

But the president, keenly aware of his poor approval rating on issues related to inflation and Covid-19, also sought to project to Americans that his administration was taking the right steps to curtail rising inflation, while leading the country on a new phase in the fight against the coronavirus.

Mr. Biden stressed that while the fight against the disease continues, the strategies to combat it are now different because of progress made.

"We've reached a new moment in the fight against Covid-19 where severe cases are down to a level not seen since July of last year," he said. Speaking of the new masking guidelines [issued](#) by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Friday, Mr. Biden — who along with other members of Congress did not wear masks — said, "Under the new guidelines most Americans and most of the country can now go mask free, and based on projections more of the country will reach that point in the next couple of weeks."

He added, "Thanks to the progress we've made in the past year, Covid-19 no longer needs to control our lives."

On his ongoing efforts as the virus becomes an endemic, the president said, "I know some are talking about living with Covid-19, but tonight I say that we'll never accept just living with Covid-19, we'll continue to combat the virus as we do other diseases."

The president went on to announce new initiatives aimed at mitigating spread, among them continued investments in vaccines and treatment, including Pfizer's [antiviral pill](#) which will be part of the newly announced Test to Treat Initiative "so people can get tested at a pharmacy and if they test positive receive the anti-viral pill on the spot at not cost," Mr. Biden said as Democrats applauded.

Governor Albert Bryan on Monday [announced major changes](#) to his administration's Covid-19 guidelines aimed at ushering in a new normal that sees the territory reverting to pre-pandemic norms while keeping safeguards in place to quickly respond to potential outbreaks. But the governor kept the masking mandate in place for the time being, telling the Consortium, "the CDC has been wrong before."

Below, the changes announced today that took effect Feb. 28, 2022:

Events

- Mr. Bryan said events no longer need the V.I. Dept. of Health's Covid approval. However, for events hosting more than 999 people, D.O.H. authorization is required.
- Additionally, event organizers still need to secure non-Covid permits from the requisite departments and agencies. "So you still need police and everybody else to get those permits done, but [the Dept. of Health]" has jurisdiction for events hosting over 1,000 people," the governor said.
- Restaurants and bars, including restaurants and bars with nightclub or cabaret licenses, food trucks, houses of worship, indoor recreational facilities, gaming centers and retail and wholesale stores may operate in accordance with their respective business license and permits, the governor said. However, they must observe masking and social distancing rules while indoors.
- As has been the case for a while, patrons are not required to wear a mask when seated in a bar or restaurant. Now, however, patrons no longer need to wear a mask when at the outdoor location of an establishment. "So for those people who have been asking for it for a long time, [masking] is no longer required at your beach bar and those types of places — you don't have to wear a mask anymore. Outdoor, food trucks, you don't have to wear a mask if you're a patron," the governor said.

- However, if you're standing and dancing inside a club, for example, masking is still required, the governor said. So too is social distancing. But how social distancing will be maintained when facilities are now allowed to host up to 999 — which is way above the capacity of most establishments — was not clear.
- There's an exception to the masking requirement: if an event organizer consults with the V.I. Dept. of Health and can provide event details that satisfies D.O.H.'s standards.
- No masks are required for vaccinated events authorized by the V.I. Dept. of Health.
- If you're fully vaccinated, you're not required to wear a mask in the kitchen of a restaurant.

Gym and Wellness Facilities, Salons and Barbershops

- Wellness centers, fitness centers, gyms, tennis courts, athletic fields, and golf courses may now operate according to their respective business licenses and permits.
- Barbershops, hair salons, nail salons and massage therapists may operate according to their business licenses and permits.

Elsewhere, Governor Bryan said visitations to nursing homes are now allowed with a negative Covid-19 test taken within 72 hours, or with proof of vaccination. "If you were trying to visit before, we had a complete ban of visitations, so now" with a test taken within 72 hours you can go in, the governor said.

Mr. Bryan also made known that the moratorium on evictions has been lifted, though if you're part of the Emergency Home Repair Program, or ERAP, the moratorium remains in place.

"So if you have an application into ERAP, your landlord can't evict you. However, if that application is resolved, or they're evicting you for a reason other than rent, they can evict you," Mr. Bryan said, explaining that tenants must comply with other rules established in their lease agreement.

Additionally, "there is no longer a freeze on the increase of rent," the governor made known.

Beginning March 1, government employees with Covid virtual work agreements will have to report to work at their respective offices during normal business hours. This order does not affect individuals with remote work agreements unrelated to Covid-19. "Whether they work remotely or they may have some issue with the building that they're working in, those are fine but everybody else back to work," the governor said.

Mr. Bryan said the protocol changes announced today makes room for the territory's public schools to return to full in-person learning beginning March 14. The Consortium sought clarity from the governor, and he said currently all students are not in school everyday. "They have some days in, some days out; it's a staggered schedule," however "everybody will be at school one time. That's what we're talking about." The governor said the V.I. Dept. of Education will have more details.

Mr. Bryan praised the public, most of whom he said followed the rules aimed at mitigating the spread of Covid-19.

"I know that moving forward we'll be okay largely because of all of you out there — the vast majority of you at least — are doing the responsible thing," he said, adding that it was an honor to have led the territory through the darkest days of the pandemic.

The governor will also soon end the weekly Covid-19 press briefings, and he said the administration had its last official Covid meeting call last week. Keen to how quickly things could change, Mr. Bryan followed those comments swiftly with "hopefully, knock on wood." He then recalled having the Covid meetings everyday, then twice a week. "Now we're just getting updates from the Dept. of Health and other departments," he said.

It's been two years since the pandemic impacted the USVI and the world, beginning in March 2020, and Mr. Bryan sees his work to ease the burden it has caused residents continuing.

"It's been a rough two years, and I know a lot of people will be suffering from the fallout of Covid for years to come — whether physically, mentally and certainly financially," he said. "So we're doing our best to try and strengthen the community with the tools that they need..."