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Unorganized Social Security Stipend Distribution on St. Croix Leads to Chaos, With Multiple Seniors Fainting

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Ernice Gilbert **November 09, 2022**

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Inside the facility once known as the "Viya Building", where OMB has its St. Croix office, seniors gathered after OMB suspended stipend distribution (11.9.22) By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

Several seniors on St. Croix fainted under punishing heat and lack of water on Wednesday, while waiting for promised Social Security stipend checks that the Office of Management and Budget said would be distributed beginning today.

The failure was a result of OMB's lack of adequate planning, which led to a protracted process and long lines that eventually turned into a disaster.

Some seniors were waiting since 6:00 a.m. to be among the early recipients in the parking lot of the former "Viya Building", the distribution site. However, what seniors expected would be a streamlined process turned into chaos as OMB's inability to move the lines along left elderly individuals standing in the scorching heat.

The situation became chaotic when seniors started collapsing, prompting the presence of several emergency personnel, including the V.I. Fire Service and EMS, while the V.I. Police Department was called in to control traffic.

Vehicles were parked at the parking lot of the KFC Restaurant in Sunny Isle, continuing to Caribbean Cinemas and all the way to the distribution site, with what appeared to be hundreds of seniors attempting to collect their \$500 stipend.

OMB eventually shut down the operation and said distribution would resume Thursday. However, a release from Gov't House today announced that distribution would be suspended for the remainder of the week on St. Croix and recommence Monday.

OMB Director Jenifer O'Neal told the Consortium Wednesday that multiple issues led to the chaos. She initially said the funds couldn't be mailed out because of inadequate addresses for some of the recipients. Other recipients' names were reversed in order, Ms. O'Neal said, further complicating distribution efforts.

Even so, in a release issued this afternoon, Ms. O'Neal encouraged residents in both districts to use the mail option to receive the stipend.

OMB initially gave recipients only two days to collect the stipend, but there was no announced order regarding how it would happen. This resulted in an overwhelming number of seniors at the collection site today.

Ms. O'Neal sought to absolve OMB. "The problem is the way we received the list and the way the checks were printed, it just created a mess," she said, adding that the list was provided by the U.S. Social Security Administration.

The Bryan administration has since announced that distribution on St. Croix will resume on Monday, Nov. 14, and instead of two days, recipients will have five days to collect the stipend. The distribution on St. Croix will take place at the Sunshine Mall, according to Gov't House.

Though distribution will continue as scheduled on St. Thomas, including next week from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday-Friday at the Schneider Regional Medical Center front parking lot, there were also complaints about the process.

On St. John, the checks continue to be available at the St. John Administrator's Office.

To receive the stipends by mail, recipients can send an email to arpa@omb.vi.gov with "SSA Stipend" in the subject line and provide the following information:

- Name
- Last four digits of their Social Security number
- Phone number
- Correct address

The \$500 payment will be issued to Social Security recipients who are seniors, or on disability.

These funds are being made available from the American Rescue Plan Act State and Local Fiscal Recovery Fund, which allows for helping households respond to the negative economic impacts of the pandemic, according to Gov't House.

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