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Bryan Sends Newly-Funded Anti-Human Trafficking Legislation To Senate; Launches Raft of New Companion Initiatives

Government / **Published On July 27, 2023 05:35 PM /**

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From left to right: AG Ariel Smith, Governor Albert Bryan, Jr., and Lt. Governor Tregenza Roach during today's announcement of legislative initiatives to combat human trafficking USVI. By. GOV'T HOUSE

“Make no mistake, this is happening here in our territory, just as it is happening throughout the Caribbean, and the world,” said Governor Albert Bryan Jr. while at Gov't House announcing a new legislative initiative by the GVI to combat human trafficking in the territory.

He noted that the territory has porous borders with a significant number of people constantly transiting through. “Some of those people, unfortunately, are human cargo being trafficked

through our territory,” he said. Mr. Bryan noted his administration’s efforts to reduce the vulnerability of undocumented people, including “easing the way to employment, establishing systems for ID making education more accessible, or just assuring that they have police presence and protection in their neighborhoods.”

Along these lines, the new initiative to combat human trafficking is intended to “once again make it safer for them and others in our community,” Governor Bryan said. Spurred by the courageous actions of the survivors of Jeffrey Epstein in coming forward, the governor indicated that Thursday’s joint announcement with Attorney General Ariel Smith would help to “save lives and prevent others from getting swept up in this horrendous cycle of abuse.”

Mr. Bryan announced the funding of the Victims of Human Trafficking Prevention Act, which was first spearheaded in 2018 by current St. Croix Administrator Samuel Sanes, who served three terms in the Senate representing St. Croix. The act, according to Mr. Bryan, was funded by part of the settlement money received from the GVI’s lawsuit against the Epstein estate, and would “create a mandatory reporting requirement for people who are in professions most likely to encounter human trafficking victims.” The measure would also encourage everyday citizens to call 911 if they notice something suspicious. Law enforcement would be required to take such complaints and pass them on to the Department of Justice for investigation. “If you see something, say something,” Governor Bryan urged, and he pressed the 35th Legislature to support the measure.

Alongside the now-funded draft legislation, the Department of Justice will soon launch a new campaign to help sensitize and educate the public as well as law enforcement about the signs of human trafficking. “Awareness is our greatest weapon,” said Governor Bryan, urging the populace to pay keen attention so that they can “identify suspect behavior and notify the proper authorities.” The campaign will include public service announcements and posters in key locations across the territory, discussing the signs, risks and consequences of sexual abuse, sex trafficking, and “the increasing prevalence of online exploitation.”

Thursday’s announcement included notice to the public of the formation of the Virgin Islands Council on Human Trafficking, which will coordinate the territory’s anti-human trafficking efforts. The initial 6-member council named by Governor Bryan includes St. Croix Administrator Samuel Sanes, V.I. Police Department Detective Deborah Hodge, Department of Justice Victims’ advocate Ruth Warren, Director of the Law Enforcement Planning Commission Angela Campbell, Women’s Coalition Executive Director Clema Lewis, and Family Resource Center Executive Director Anya Stuart. Mr. Bryan indicated that more public- and private- sector individuals with experience in the field will be added in the days and weeks to come. He urged interested persons from the community to indicate their willingness to participate in this important work.

“I urge other states and territories throughout the United States, the Caribbean and the world to follow our lead to curb this terrible crime to within the fullest extent of the law,” Governor Bryan exhorted.

The Attorney General reminded the public of the more than \$120 million in settlement funds resulting from the lawsuit against the Epstein estate, and the ongoing lawsuit against JP Morgan in which the territory is seeking at least \$150 million in damages. “These types of legal actions are necessary to combat human trafficking in the future,” Ms. Smith said.

The Attorney General looked forward to the VHTPA coming into effect, because it makes provisions to train law enforcement officials specifically on child sexual abuse and trafficking. She echoed Governor Bryan’s exhortation to the community to alert authorities if they suspect

such activity. "We are the eyes and ears in this community," she noted. "Silence leads to more victimization of young women and girls."

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