GOVERNMENT HOUSE
UNITED STATES VIRGIN ISLANDS

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Governor Bryan Eases Seating-Capacity Restrictions For Houses of Worship

Administration Announces Criminal Penalties
For Individuals Who Forge Required COVID Test Documentation

U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS — In advance of the upcoming Easter holidays, Governor Albert Bryan Jr. has eased restrictions for churches, which now can have gatherings of up to 200 people or 50 percent of their capacity, whichever is less, Government House Communications Director Richard Motta Jr. announced during the Government House Weekly Press Briefing on Monday.

The new limit goes into effect immediately and will remain in effect moving forward.

“Just to be clear, you cannot seat 200 if your capacity cannot accommodate 200 people,” Director Motta said.

Director Motta reminded churches that parishioners still must wear a mask and adhere to social distancing guidelines.

“We have an especially long Easter holiday weekend, beginning with Transfer Day on Wednesday and ending with Easter Monday. Government Offices will be closed during this time, and Governor Bryan encourages all Virgin Islanders to enjoy the long holiday weekend but do so safely and in accordance with our local health guidelines,” Director Motta said. “Please do enjoy the beach but remember that they will be open at 6 a.m. and closed at 5 p.m. from this Wednesday until Monday. All other health guidelines apply while on the beach, including mass gathering restrictions and social distancing.”

Anyone who thinks they may have contracted COVID-19 can call the Epidemiology hotline at 340-712-6299 or 340-776-1519. For more information, visit covid19usvi.com.

For information about the COVID-19 vaccines, call the VITEMA hotline Mondays-Fridays from 8:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. at 340-777-VACS (8227).

Falsifying COVID Test Results
Attorney Eric Chancellor of the Virgin Islands Attorney General's Criminal Division also appeared during Monday's press briefing to warn residents against uploading falsified COVID test results to the Department of Tourism's travel portal.

Attorney Chancellor said that moving forward, the Office of the Attorney General will prosecute anyone caught doing so.

"There is simply no excuse for this behavior, and make no mistake about it, submitting false documents to the Government of the Virgin Islands is criminal behavior. Falsifying test results for submission to the Government of the Virgin Islands is criminal behavior," Attorney Chancellor said. "In accordance with this policy announcement, the Attorney General has directed that henceforth, anyone submitting forged documents or false test results through the travel-screening portal will be prosecuted."

According to Attorney Chancellor, two Virgin Islands statutes are applicable:

- Title 14, Section 843 deals with false and fraudulent statements upon the government and violators face a fine of up to $500, imprisonment of up to two years or both.
- Title 14, Section 795 relates to the recording of forged instruments, and violators face a fine of up to $1,000, up to five years imprisonment or both.

Emergency Rental Assistance Program
The Emergency Rental Assistance Program to assist families who have fallen behind on rent payments as a result of the pandemic opened to residents on Monday, March 29.

To qualify, residents must:

- Owe at least one month rent or utility payment or anticipate a need for future rental assistance
- Prove they have suffered loss of income because of COVID-19
- Have one or more household members at risk of homelessness because of nonpayment of rent
- Have an annual income at or below 80% of area median income.

For more information, go to www.vihfa.gov/erap or contact the Virgin Islands Housing Finance Authority at 340-772-4432 or 340-777-4432.

Income Tax refunds
The Bureau of Internal Revenue (BIR) and the Department of Finance (DOF) will issue 6,424 income tax refunds totaling $15.7 million for tax filers owed for tax year 2018.

The BIR has established a hotline to assist in responding to the volume of calls because of the stimulus checks and income tax refund inquiries at 340-714-9325.

Stimulus payments

The Department of Finance has paid out approximately 39,000 checks under the $600 CARES Act 2 stimulus, and there are about 3,000 checks being prepared for distribution next week. After those are issued, the Government of the Virgin Islands anticipates approximately 3,000 more checks, primarily owed to people who filed their 2019 income taxes late, will be paid out by mid-April, ending the payout of the CARES Act 2 stimulus funding.

The Virgin Islands has not yet received funds for the $1,400 stimulus checks under the American Rescue Plan from the U.S. Treasury, but the Territory is prepared to move those as soon as the funding arrives, Director Motta said.

"We are awaiting funding for the $1,400 stimulus payments authorized under the American Rescue Plan and will deliver those payments to eligible residents once that funding is received from the U.S. Treasury," Director Motta said.

Vaccinations
After three weeks of vaccinations open to all residents at the Community Vaccination Centers in both districts, the Department of Health has given 7,199 vaccinations, including the 5,000th vaccination on St, Thomas on Monday, March 22.

At the first Saturday Community Vaccination on St. John, the department vaccinated 155 individuals, and those Community Vaccination drives will continue on St. John on Saturdays.

- 33,321 total vaccinations administered to 25,283 unique individuals.
- 30% of the eligible population has received a first dose.
- 16% of the eligible population has received a second dose.

COVID-19 cases
As of March 27, the Department of Health has tested 79,342 people with 2,097 positives, with 6 new positives reported on March 27.

The seven-day positivity rate has dropped to 2.4% and there currently are 55 active cases (26 on St. Croix; 20 on St. Thomas; and 9 on St. John).

- Five COVID-19 patients currently are hospitalized, with one patient on a ventilator, at Juan F. Luis Medical Center on St. Croix.
- One COVID-19 patient is currently hospitalized and on a ventilator at Schneider Regional Medical Center on St. Thomas.

The Bryan/Roach Administration continues to be committed to transparency, stabilizing the economy, restoring trust in government and ensuring that the disaster recovery is completed as quickly as possible.

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