GOVERNMENT HOUSE
UNITED STATES VIRGIN ISLANDS

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Governor Bryan testifies virtually before the House Committee on Natural Resources on Wednesday, May 18, 2022.

Governor Bryan Testifies to House Natural Resources Committee About Territory's Needs from Office of Insular Affairs 2023 Budget

Governor strongly urges lawmakers to give the territories parity with states for Supplemental Security Income, which provides monthly payments to meet basic needs, such as food, shelter and clothing

U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS — Governor Albert Bryan Jr. testified virtually before the U.S. House's Committee on Natural Resources during a hearing about the Department of Interior's Office of Insular Affairs (DOIOIA) 2023 budget, and he outlined the Territory's ongoing and new needs from the federal agency.

During his written testimony prior to questions from the lawmakers, Governor Bryan decried last month's U.S. Supreme Court decision that denies equal Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits to the territories, an issue that also was brought up during questioning by Rep. Rashida Tlaib (D-Michigan).

"A disabled American who lives in a State is entitled to receive Supplemental Security Income without regard to geographic location or what taxes are paid. If she moves to the Virgin Islands, she loses that right," the Governor said during his prepared testimony.

"Territories cannot look to the Constitution of the United States for equal protection under the law in making claims for Supplemental Security Income like their countrymen residing on the mainland," Governor Bryan said. "Instead, the Court has directed us to appeal to the Congress. We ask you now: Grant our citizens parity with their fellow Americans and guarantee Virgin Islanders the same access to the Supplemental Security Income benefits. We are not second-class citizens."

During the questioning period, Congresswoman Tlaib said it is unacceptable that 3.5 million people living in U.S. territories are subject to a separate and unequal status quo and denied access to, and the full benefit of, lifesaving federal programs like SSI and Medicaid, and she asked how the lack of parity impacts residents of the territories.

"For us it means families splitting up. A lot of time we have families that are here and the wife or the husband would move to the states with the child in order to get better care and benefit from those benefits," Governor Bryan responded. "It would make such a huge difference in our community for parents raising children with disabilities, especially when they age-out of regular schools and they need other support systems that those parents can't afford."

During his testimony, Governor Bryan also touched on a number of other issues he would like to see addressed by federal lawmakers:

- Requiring federal agencies to waive matching fund obligations for disaster relief funding. "Significant amounts of appropriated disaster funds remain inaccessible to the Territory because of unrealistic local match requirements imposed by federal agencies," Governor Bryan said.
- Reversing tax code stipulations subjecting territories to the so-called "GILTI" tax, which is designed to discourage American companies from stashing profits in foreign tax havens. "The U.S. Virgin Islands is neither foreign nor a tax haven: it is a U.S. Territory whose tax laws are promulgated by Congress. Treating us like a foreign country makes no sense and is contrary to decades of Congressional policies intended to encourage U.S. investment in the Territories," Governor Bryan said.
- Assistance with the Environmental Protection Agency concerns about reopening the Limetree Bay Refinery. "We all share the EPA's concern with safety. But it is not clear that the EPA understands the unique importance of the refinery to the economic, financial, and social well-being of the Virgin Islands community," Governor Bryan said.
- Restoring adequate funding for the Territory's highways. "That funding was cut to the bone in 2012 and has never been fully restored, with predictably deleterious effects on our roads – yet another example of Americans receiving poorer treatment simply because of where in the United States they live. Singling out the four small territories for funding cuts was unfair and ignored our uniquely pressing transportation funding needs," Governor Bryan said.

The entire hearing can be viewed at the House Committee on Natural Resources You Tube Page at www.youtube.com/user/NaturalResourcesDems.

The Bryan-Roach Administration is investing in the Territory's people, infrastructure and future through transparency, stabilizing the economy, restoring trust in the government and ensuring that recovery projects are completed as quickly as possible. Visit transparency.vi.gov

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