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Governor Bryan to Escalate USVI Crime-Fighting Strategies After President Says COVID Funds Can Be Used to End Gun Violence

U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS — Governor Albert Bryan Jr. lauded President Biden's call to use federal COVID-19 relief funds to fight the national epidemic of gun violence and said the President's directive has provided the U.S. Virgin Islands with an unprecedented opportunity to make significant inroads in curbing violent crime.

"We have a tremendous opportunity now with President Biden's green light to significantly increase the tools we need. These resources will help us purchase more equipment, hire more officers and add more cameras to our growing surveillance network to help stop the violent crime plaguing our community," Governor Bryan said. "We also plan to use these resources to purchase additional scanning equipment at our Territory's ports."

The president designated some COVID-19 funds as public safety monies, and the Treasury Department issued new guidance clarifying that cities and states can use their share of direct aid to hire police officers and other law enforcement officials, prosecute gun traffickers and obtain new technology to respond to gun violence. Additionally, public schools can use their share of $122 billion in rescue money on community violence intervention programs and other public safety strategies.

Governor Bryan noted that crime has risen dramatically across the nation since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which was the focus of the president's speech on Tuesday.

Nationally, homicides have increased by 24% over last year, and gun-related deaths are up 21%, and law enforcement officials have concerns that gun violence will get even worse this summer, which coincides with relaxed COVID-19 restrictions in most states after months of shutdowns.

Although some cities have reported spikes in other forms of violence, President Biden pointed to guns as the most serious threat. Burglary, larceny and drug offense rates nationally were down over the first four months of 2021 from last year.

In the U.S. Virgin Islands, the Territory has had fewer violent crimes and more arrests in 2019-2020 than the same period in 2017-2019, according to V.I. Police Commissioner Trevor Velinor.

There were 3,119 violent crimes with 608 arrests in 2019-2020, compared with 4,324 violent crimes with 524 arrests in 2017-2018. In those same timeframes, VIPD seized 375 firearms in 2019-2020 versus 256 that police seized in 2017-2018.

In the last four years (2017-2020), there were 192 homicides in the Territory resulting in 55 arrests. Of the 55 arrests, 39 were in calendar years 2019 and 2020, and there were 16 homicide arrests in 2017 and 2018.

“We’ve been seeing it in our country for far too long, and it has spiked since the start of the pandemic over a year ago,” President Biden said. “I've been at this a long time, and there are things we know that work – that reduce gun violence and violent crime.”

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