GOVERNMENT HOUSE
UNITED STATES VIRGIN ISLANDS

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Governor Bryan Working With Other Governors To Push CDC to Allow Cruise Lines to Dock at U.S. Ports

Governor Reiterates his Call for Virgin Islanders to Adhere to Social Distancing and Masking Guidelines During Upcoming Easter and Memorial Day Holidays

U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS — Governor Albert Bryan Jr. said during Monday's Government House weekly press briefing that he is working with other governors to proactively urge the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to lift its "No Sail Order" and allow the Cruise Lines to resume passenger operations in the United States.

Governor Bryan said he and other government entities with a stake in the cruise industry met virtually two weeks ago with all of the cruise line executives and the Florida Caribbean Cruise Association to discuss the return of cruise lines to the Territory.

"The meeting was very cordial, but it was apparent that the principals were not optimistic about the return of cruise travel to U.S. waters," Governor Bryan said. "We have decided to take a more proactive approach to the return of cruise ships and have issued a national appeal to the president to issue the regulations for cruise travel from the CDC. We, as well as 15 other states, have felt the economic pressure of the cessation of cruise travel in the U.S."

The Governor said he is working with the other governors to draft a letter to President Biden asking for the new rules and regulations for cruising and for a potential sail date.

"We have been waiting on these rules and regulations since last year, when cruise travel was banned in the United States," Governor Bryan said.

Upcoming holidays
The Governor once more reiterated the importance of residents continuing to follow social distancing and masking requirements, particularly in light of the upcoming Memorial Day and Easter holidays.

"We are seeing instances where people are attending parties both here in the Territory and on the mainland, particularly in the state of Florida, which does not follow these guidelines, and as a result, we are experiencing a slight uptick in positive cases," Governor Bryan said.

"We have been doing well and have managed to strike that balance between protecting the public health, keeping our economy afloat and allowing individuals to enjoy again some of the leisure activities of pre-pandemic life," the Governor said. "But we can easily lose our footing on that tight rope that we have been so successful at walking. There have been too many instances of residents frequenting areas that are either surging or are still considered COVID hotspots."

The Governor urged residents to get vaccinated to continue suppressing the spread of COVID-19 and discouraged unnecessary travel, even though there are stringent health safety measures in place at all the Territory's ports.

"I get it. It has been a long time. We have endured a year of strict protocols and changes to our social lives that no one enjoys," Governor Bryan said. "If we can achieve community immunity through vaccination, we can get back to social gatherings and some of the other leisure activities of pre-pandemic life."

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).

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 will begin 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 example, a family of four living on St. Thomas would have to have an annual household income of $53,700 or less to qualify for the Emergency Rental Assistance Program. The program does not extend benefits to individuals seeking assistance with paying their home mortgages.

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.

Meeting with Education Secretary
Governor Bryan will be meeting with Education Secretary Miguel Cardona this week as part of the Governor's responsibilities as co-chairman of the National Governors Association's Community Renewal Task Force to address workforce development, career and technical education, early childhood education and other priority issues under the task force's community renewal agenda.

"This is an important opportunity for the Territory to have our education and workforce development priorities highlighted in this forum, and I look forward to not just a productive conversation but a working path forward with the U.S. Department of Education towards supporting these priorities," Governor Bryan said.

Income Tax refunds
The Bureau of Internal Revenue (BIR) and the Department of Finance (DOF) will issue 6,425 income tax refunds totaling $15 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
On Friday, the BIR and DOF processed and mailed out an additional 6,985 stimulus checks totaling more than $5 million for thefunds approved from the coronavirus aid package passed in December 202, also known as the second stimulus.

"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," Governor Bryan said.

Pop-Up testing sites
This week, pop-up testing sites will be at the following locations:

- **Home Depot** on St. Thomas on Tuesday, March 23, from 1 to 3 p.m.
- **Canegata Rec Center** on St. Croix on Tuesday, March 23, from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.
- **The V.I. Port Authority Gravel Yard** on St. John on Wednesday, March 24, from 1 to 4 p.m.
- **The National Park** in Red Hook on St. Thomas on Thursday, March 25, from 1 to 3 p.m.
- **Budhoe Park** on St. Croix on Thursday, March 25, from 10:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m.

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.

- 33,826 total vaccinations administered
- 30% of the eligible population has received a first dose

- 12.8% of the eligible population has received a second dose.

COVID-19 cases
In the last 10 days – from March 12-22 – there have been 91 new positives (68 on St. Croix and 23 on St. Thomas) and 2,151 people were tested.

The seven-day positivity rate is 4%.

- Three 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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