

With Caribbean Labor Less Accessible Under Trump Policies, Plaskett Points to Untapped Virgin Islands Workforce

Delegate Stacey Plaskett argues that while immigration options narrow and recovery projects advance, official unemployment figures obscure a sizable group of disengaged Virgin Islanders who could be drawn back into the workforce through targeted training.

Disaster Recovery / **Published On January 27, 2026 07:13 AM /**

Janeke Simon **January 27, 2026**

Image not found or type unknown



With unemployment at historic lows, immigration pathways tightening at the federal level, and billions of dollars in recovery projects moving closer to construction, V.I. Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett says the territory can no longer afford to overlook a labor pool that already exists at home.

Speaking amid growing concern over whether the Virgin Islands has enough workers to sustain its massive rebuilding effort, Plaskett argues that official unemployment figures mask a much larger group of residents who are currently disengaged from the labor force and could be brought into recovery-related work with targeted training and recruitment.

“While we have a low unemployment rate, if you peel that number back, we have a lot of people who are no longer looking for work,” she said. “I think that number is closer to 18, 19 percent.”

Plaskett believes many of those individuals are unskilled workers who could be drawn back into employment through creative partnerships with the large contractors now being awarded major recovery projects. She suggested developing structured recruitment, upskilling, and employment pipelines that would allow Virgin Islanders to participate directly in rebuilding their own communities.

The labor question surfaced again during Governor Albert Bryan Jr.’s State of the Territory Address on Monday, where he highlighted how the territory’s recovery effort has begun shifting from funding allocations and obligations to contract awards and active execution. As construction accelerates, the [availability of workers](#) has become a central concern, even as projects move closer to breaking ground.

Governor Bryan noted that the territory’s unemployment rate currently stands at 3.6 percent, a level many economists consider full employment. In previous years, the administration had looked to the possibility of supplementing the workforce with labor from neighboring Caribbean islands, following patterns seen decades ago. Given the current federal posture on immigration, however, that option has largely fallen away.

More recently, the governor has expressed confidence that national contractors receiving project bundles worth hundreds of millions of dollars will be able to source sufficient labor from within the United States. Plaskett does not dispute that possibility, but she says it should not preclude efforts to activate local workers who have been sidelined from the job market.

In addition to advocating for local workforce engagement, Plaskett said she remains willing to push for federal flexibility that would allow the Virgin Islands to temporarily welcome laborers from other Caribbean islands to assist with the recovery.

“I told the governor that I’m willing and able...let’s continue to press on the administration about trying to get exemptions for us to bring other individuals in through the Caribbean,” she said.

Plaskett has repeatedly argued in Washington that the Virgin Islands’ unique status reduces concerns that temporary or immigrant laborers would move onward to the mainland United States.

“We are outside of the customs zone, meaning that individuals, while they can come here, cannot necessarily still get on a plane and go into the United States, because they have to go through Customs,” she said. “I’m making that argument all the time in Washington.”

Still, she acknowledged that such efforts face significant headwinds under current federal policy. “We have a broken immigration system, and they’re continually cutting back, particularly on giving visas and opening up opportunities for people from the Caribbean,” Plaskett said.

With the territory’s recovery engine gathering speed, the question of where its workforce will come from remains unresolved. Plaskett’s message, however, is clear: before looking outward, the Virgin Islands must first take a closer look at the untapped labor potential within its own

population.

© Viconsortium 2026