

BILL ESTABLISHING MEDICAL DOCTORAL PROGRAM SCHOLARSHIP MOVES FORWARD

Date : October 22, 2019

[ST. THOMAS- Members of the Committee on Education and Workforce Development, chaired by Sen. Donna Frett-Gregory, met Tuesday at the Capitol Building. At that time, they voted favorably for several bills, including Bill No. 33-0134- An Act amending Title 17, chapter 15 of the Virgin Islands Code to establish a Psychiatric Medical Doctoral Program Scholarship. All approved items will be forwarded to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary for further consideration.](#)

“The bills that are before us today are focus forward to strengthen the future of the education system in the Virgin Islands,” said Sen. Frett-Gregory in her opening remarks.

The first measure seeks to establish the Virgin Islands Psychiatry Program Scholarships Fund in which the Virgin Islands Department of Education will administer to residents in the Territory who are pursuing a career in Psychiatry. The scholarship will be awarded to one recipient in both the St. Thomas-St. John District and the St. Croix District, not exceeding \$40,000, for four academic years and applied to an accredited medical school along with its costs, to include tuition, books, supplies, academic fees, and lodging. Sponsor of the bill, Sen. Kurt Vialet said, “The Territory lacks an adequate number of psychiatrists. We need to create a pool of psychiatric care. Therefore, the bill provides a funding source for students attending medical school in which upon graduation, who will work in the Territory.”

The Virgin Islands Department of Health Commissioner, Justa Encarnacion, shared support for the bill, citing that the “scholarship paired with a commitment to provide services to the Department is critical in filling the void and will aid in establishing continued care for people in need of

psychiatric services.” In response to a line of questioning by Sen. Donna Frett Gregory, Encarnacion stated that presently there is one full-time psychiatrist and one who is on contract. The Department is combating mental illness through assessments and treatments of eligible clients because not all homeless people suffer from mental illness. The Virgin Islands Board of Medical Examiners Chairman Frank Odlum, M.D. recommended that in addition to students, the scholarship should include existing psychiatrists by offering a partial loan repayment program. Sen. Stedman Hodge said, “The suggested method will attract a lot more psychiatrists to the Territory. Additionally, partial loan repayment allows the applicant to assume some responsibilities for their education.”

Separately, senators voted to hold in committee at the call of the Chair: Bill 33-0196- An Act amending Title 17, chapter 9, subchapter I, section 83 of the Virgin Islands Code by setting the beginning of the school day no earlier than 8:30 am. The V.I. Department of Education Commissioner Raquel Berry-Benjamin indicated that legislation is unnecessary in determining the start time for public schools. “VIDE prefers to remain in control of the daily operations, structure, and scheduling of the school day per public school,” said Berry-Benjamin. “I can’t say that I am for or against this measure,” said Sen. Kurt Vialet. “There are mixed reactions from high school students and the parents of elementary school students on St. Croix. A comprehensive study is required before changes.”

However, lawmakers voted and approved: Bill No. 33-0207- An Act amending Title 17, chapter 11, section 121 of the Virgin Islands Code by requiring persons teaching children in kindergarten-4 through third grade to have specific early childhood education requirements outlined by the Board of Education. Thereby ensuring that primary grade students receive a quality education; requiring the Board of Education to promulgate rules and regulations to support the criteria for the minimum requirements and providing funding for early childhood educators to obtain the minimum requirements.

Lastly, policymakers also voted favorably: Bill No. 33-0189- An Act amending Title 3, chapter 7 of the Virgin Islands Code by designating the existing sections as subchapter 1 and adding a new subchapter II establishing the Virgin Islands Virtual Information System.

Senators present are Donna Frett-Gregory, Janelle Sarauw, Oakland Benta, Steven Hodge, Jr., Allison DeGazon, Kurt Vialet, and Novelle Francis.

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