

BILL TO AWARD VAL AND SAL OF ADULT EDUCATION AND OTHERS HELD IN COMMITTEE

Date : October 9, 2019

[ST. THOMAS- Members of the Committee on Education and Workforce Development, chaired by Sen. Donna Frett-Gregory, met Wednesday at the Capitol Building and voted to hold in committee at the call of the chair, Bill No. 33-0102 to include graduates of the Adult Education Center among those eligible to receive a scholarship as valedictorian and salutatorian. Senators also voted on additional measures and received testimony on the status of the Virgin Islands Department of Labor \(VIDOL\). All approved items will be forwarded to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary for further consideration.](#)

Sponsor of Bill No. 33-0102, Sen. Allison DeGazon, stated that the legislation is simple yet impactful. "It is a common practice that graduated valedictorians and salutatorians from traditional schools are awarded a scholarship. However, this opportunity should extend to all Adult Education Programs." Similarly, the Virgin Islands Board of Education Executive Director Milton Potter said, "codifying ensures that graduates from the Adult Education Programs remain on equal footing with their counterparts from traditional education programs."

Furthermore, the Virgin Islands Department of Education Commissioner Raquel Berry-Benjamin indicated that although the Department supports the bill, the language should be changed for the inclusion of valedictorians and salutatorians graduating from all Adult Education Programs in the Virgin Islands. "The language of the bill needs to be adjusted from the Adult Education Center to state Adult Education Programs," she recommended.

Presently, the Virgin Islands Board of Education has issued a total of \$25,500 in scholarship funds to valedictorians and \$17,000 to salutatorian to local students attending the University of the Virgin Islands. The breakdown is as follows: Valedictorians receive \$1,000 per person and \$700

for salutorian per person. However, qualifying students who pursue undergraduate programs at colleges and universities off-island have yet to be awarded scholarship monies due to the lack of funds. As a result, there is an unused balance that accumulates annually in the account, according to the Virgin Islands Board of Education Financial Aid Expert, Sylvanie Rhymer.

In response to Sen. Kurt Vialet's inquiry regarding the amount of the unused balance, Executive Director Potter stated that the information is unavailable for the hearing today. "I am lost as of why, if the law states that once a program is not offered at the University of the Virgin Islands, a student can use scholarship monies to study at an educational institution abroad. However, scholarship funds have yet to be issued to them. We have to do right by our students," said Sen. Frett-Gregory. Ultimately, senators voted to hold the bill in committee at the call of the chair.

Separately, policymakers voted and approved Bill No. 33-0019- An Act amending Title 17, chapter 7, section 61a of the Virgin Islands Code regarding the school year. However, senators voted to hold in committee Bill No. 33-0131- An Act amending Title 17, chapter 5 of the Virgin Islands Code by inserting a new section 41g requiring the completion of a minimum of ten community service hours at a senior center or home for the aged for graduation from a public high school.

Lastly, the Virgin Islands Department of Labor Commissioner Gary Malloy shared an update. Regarding the Disaster Dislocated Worker Grant Program, VIDOL was awarded \$3,000,000,000 from Federal Emergency Management Agency and has an unexpended balance of \$292,000. Although, the original end date of the program was September 2019, VIDOL was granted an extension until March 2020. Furthermore, VIDOL Assistant Commissioner Cindy Richardson mentioned that the V.I. Unemployment Insurance Programs are in the process of modernizing operations to increase automation for Unemployment Insurance compensation processes for the Tax Unit. The Benefits Unit disseminated a total of \$7,421,703 to 1,255 claimants as of August 2019 for the Regular Unemployment Insurance; and a total of \$3,354,827 was disbursed for Extended Benefits. Lastly, Richardson indicated that VIDOL recently completed the Single Audit but there were findings. Presently, VIDOL is in the process of addressing each one.

Senators present are Donna Frett-Gregory, Janelle Sarauw, Kenneth Gittens, Javan James, Steven Hodge, Jr., Allison DeGazon, Kurt Violet, and Marvin Blyden.

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