

BILL TO END CHILD MARRIAGE MOVES FORWARD, LAWMAKERS LEARN STATUS OF YOUTH PROGRAMS

Date : October 29, 2019

St.

Thomas- Members of the Committee on Youth, Sports, Parks, and Recreation chaired by Sen. Javan James, Sr., convened in a meeting at the Capitol Building on Tuesday, and voted favorably for Bill No. 33-0109- An Act amending Title 16, Chapter 1, Subsection II of the Virgin Islands Code by prohibiting the issuance of Marriage License to persons under the age of 18. Separately, lawmakers were updated on the Youth Programs and Competitions locally and nationally. All items approved will be forwarded to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary for further consideration.

The

measure seeks to prohibit the issuance of marriage to children who are under 18 years old. Presently, the existing law allows for underaged teenagers to be forced into marriage with the consent of their father, single mother, or guardian; with no regard to the youth. Sexual intercourse with a child from ages thirteen to seventeen is considered aggravated rape in the second degree and is punishable to a life sentence in prison under the Virgin Islands Code. However, once the child is married this law is no longer applicable. Sponsor of the bill, Sen. Javan James said, "The current Virgin Islands Code allows females who are 14 years old and males who are 16 years old to be married in the U.S. Virgin Islands with the consent of the parents or guardian. Based on my research and collaboration with non-profit organizations, we found it fitting to stop underage-marriage in the Territory."

Similarly,

The Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Council Executive Director Khnuma Simmonds expressed support for the bill. Simmonds indicated that the bill enforces safety and human rights by fighting against forced marriages, parental coercion, sex trafficking, intimate partner violence, and immigration abuse.

Sen. Janelle Sarauw said, "The legal age to vote and to sign-up for the army is age 18; yet it is legal for an underage child to marry an adult. There is no

excuse to be senseless and lawless because legally a child is still not independent despite entering into a marriage.”

Fraidy

Reiss, Founder and Executive Director of Unchained at Last, a non-profit agency devoted to ending child marriages mentioned that underaged children forced to remain in marriages scarcely has legal rights. “Children in the Virgin Islands do not have the right to leave home and seek refuge in shelters from parents who are planning unwanted marriages or trying to escape an abusive spouse. Children cannot initiate their legal proceedings to annul a marriage nor do they have the finances to retain an attorney.” Furthermore, the Department of Human Services Assistant Commissioner Carla Benjamin stated that DHS frequently encountered child marriages during investigations of cases of teen pregnancy. However, the statistics on the number of child marriages in the Territory is currently unknown because it was not prohibited by law. Sen. Athneil “Bobby” Thomas said, “Society should not subject children as young as twelve years old for a future of abusive.

Separately,

Malcolm Gregor, Executive Director of the Virgin Islands Career and Technical Education Board shared the status of the youth programs. Since 2018, the Board funded the travel expenses for 50 students participating in Conferences and Competitive events as it pertains to academic studies, clubs, and organizations. Gregor stated that the Future Business Leaders of America, Future Farmers of America, Aviation Academy, and Skills USA are programs fiscally supported by the Board. **###**