

BILL TO EXPAND OPTOMETRISTS TO TREAT GLAUCOMA IN THE VIRGIN ISLANDS MOVES FORWARD

Date : August 15, 2018

St. Thomas – The Committee on Health Hospitals and Human Services, chaired by Sen. Nereida Rivera O'Reilly, held a meeting at the Capitol Building on Wednesday, and approved several measures including Bill No. 32-0244- An Act amending title 27, Virgin Islands Code, chapter 1 subchapter VII, section 161 relating to the practice of optometry.

The measure seeks to expand optometrists to treat glaucoma in the Virgin Islands as compared to their counterparts on the U.S. mainland.

Glaucoma is a disease of the eye associated with an elevated ocular pressure that can damage the optic nerve which can lead to loss of vision and irreversible blindness. This disease is highly prevalent among the African American population.

“Previously, the bill excluded optometrist from treating glaucoma. It is important to note that 49 states have expanded the scope of Optometrist except for Massachusetts,” said Sponsor of the Bill Sen. O'Reilly. “The intent of this legislation does not allow optometrists to do surgery, laser treatment or incisions.”

Lisa Adams, an Optometrist/Member of the Board of Optometrically Examiners, stated that patients would benefit from expanding the availability of providers to treat a high incidence of glaucoma. “By granting this prescriptive authority of therapeutics in the Virgin Islands, it would bring the practice of optometry on par with the nation.”

However, a written testimony submitted by Michelle Davis, Commissioner, for the Virgin Islands Department of Health opposes the legislation and urges lawmakers to “table” the amendment.

“The key concern is that any plans to further expand the scope of practice for CTOs must include a fully appointed and active Optometry Board prepared to regulate the scope of any expansion.”

In addition to Bill. No. 32-0244, senators also voted favorably for Bill No. 32-0235-an Act amending title 3 Virgin Islands Code, chapter 23, section 415, subsection (b), paragraph (2) subparagraph (B) relating to the composition of the Board of Dental Examiners to authorize of a dental therapist to the board. Sen. O'Reilly is the sponsor of this measure.

“The fact remains that there are 94 licensed dentists and over 100,000 residents who need dental services. The public should have access to their dentists and not be discouraged by long waiting lists,” said Sen. Dwayne DeGraff. “Adding dental therapist is a win-win situation that will benefit the people of the Virgin Islands.”

Sen. Janette Millin Young inquired about the lack of access to dentists. Olutayo Delano, BDS, MS, Chair of the Virgin Islands Board of Dental Examiners stated that there are more than 94 dentists because there are ten offices housing more dentists. The problem is not the lack of dental care access but that patients are not coming in because they pick a provider based on the referral process.

Commissioner Davis stated that she does not support this measure. “It is premature to adopt dental therapy legislation considering that the field is still in development. The Territory has successfully improved access to quality dental care in a variety of ways through licensure and adopting sound proven standards.”

“I don't understand the pushback,” said Sen. Sammuel Sanes. “Oral hygiene is critical. Poor oral hygiene can lead to a medical diagnosis that is detrimental to the health of a patient. Dental therapists can help streamline the process.”

Separately, the following measures were approved:

- Bill No. 32-0236-An Act amending Title 27, Virgin Islands Code, chapter 1, subchapter III relating to the practice of dental therapy in the Territory
- BR No. 32-0247-an Act to provide funding for the establishment of an inpatient mental health facility with supporting resources in the Virgin Islands.
- Bill No. 32-0245-An Act amending Title 19, Virgin Islands Code part II, chapter 15, section 222 to exempt Urgent Care Facilities from the requirement of getting a certificate of need and mandating that these entities must accept MAP, Medicare, and uninsured patients
- Bill No. 32-0173-a Resolution honoring and commending the Family Resource Center for its services to victims and families in the U.S. Virgin Islands throughout the years

All bills approved will be forwarded to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary for further consideration.

Senators present are Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly, Janette Millin Young, Sammuel Sanes, Marvin Blyden, Novelle Francis, and Dwayne M. DeGraff. Photos:

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