

## **BILL TO PROVIDE A REGISTRY FOR THE ELDERLY MOVES FORWARD AND SENATORS RECIEVE UPDATE ON MEDICAL EVACUATIONS**

**Date** : April 10, 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 Tuesday, and approved Bill No. 32-0064 to provide for a registry of the elderly and people with disabilities living alone and to receive an update on medical evacuations post-Hurricane Irma and Maria.

“After hurricanes occurred many of the seniors were displaced. This legislation is significant in assisting persons to receive the necessary assistance as a result of a natural disaster,” said Sen. Dwayne DeGraff, Sponsor of the bill.

The Amendment in the Nature of a Substitute for Bill No. 32-0064 includes keeping the data collected for registry confidential and not be disclosed other than to assist the individual in time of a natural disaster or if there is a medical emergency. If unlawfully disclosed, perpetrators can be fined up to \$500 and/or imprisoned for one year. The Department of Human Services shall maintain a registry of persons 60 years and older who live alone and persons with disabilities who live alone.

Ana Valez-Martinez, Director of Herbert Grigg Home for the Elderly stated that there are many registries throughout the government but there isn’t a single registry that can be accessed territory-wide. Therefore, emergency agencies should partake in this bill. “Implementation of a more comprehensive registry, would provide an opportunity for emergency response agencies to obtain information through the Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management to facilitate better planning of critical services that these individuals need during natural disasters or other emergencies,” said Director Martinez.

“What is the estimated cost to get the registry started and how many staffers are needed to oversee it?” asked Sen. Janet Millin Young. Director Martinez stated that approximately \$15,000 is needed to implement and monitor the system. Additional funds are required to hire two staff members. “Will the staff work full-time or part-time?” inquired Sen. O’Reilly. In response, Director Martinez stated that initially, staff will work full-time to manage and market the registry territory-wide. Employment status can be revisited the following year.

Ultimately, committee members voted favorably for the bill and its amendment. It will be forwarded to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary for further consideration. Separately, lawmakers were updated on the status of medical evacuations and an evacuation plan in wake of a natural disaster.

As of April 6, 2018, there is a total of 796 patients that were medically evacuated from the Territory to Georgia, Puerto Rico, Florida, Mississippi, South Carolina and Louisiana. 190 dialysis, classic and non-medical attendant's patients off-island. Out of the 175 patients relocated to Georgia, 106 patients receive hemodialysis treatment, 21 patients are classic medical conditions, 48 are non-medical attendants and there were 49 patients who died; according to the Virgin Islands Department of Health Commissioner Michelle Davis.

"Did the department properly document the 49 patients who expired and the cause of their deaths?" asked Sen. Novelle Francis. Kathleen Arnold-Louis, Liaison for Medical Evacuees, Department of Health said, "I would have to say no we do not have proper documentation at this time. However, the Department requested Death Certificates for the deceased but that does not include the events leading up to the person's death."

Although the Government of the Virgin Islands did not have an evacuation plan in wake of two hurricanes, officials relied heavily on an evacuation plan from the Federal Government.

Commissioner Davis stated that the Federal Government standard operating procedures were followed for the evacuation of the residents. "The Federal Government coordinated and paid for the evacuation and the medical care of clients which included meals, lodging, transportation and the medical needs identified through December 30, 2017. The Federal Government is also paying for the return trip of all discharged patients."

Sen. Sammuell Sanes said, "A plan is necessary before the next hurricane season. There needs to be a solid plan in place by the end of the week or the end of the month to ensure that the loss of lives after a patient is transferred to medical hospitals and facilities off-island does not occur again." Chief Executive Officer of Juan Louis F. Hospital and Medical Center Ruben Malloy said, "There are many evacuation plans in place. VITEMA has a plan and the Department of Health has a plan. We are in a learning process and lessons learned are based on the events that took place after the storms." Sen. O'Reilly said, "Without a written plan. Then a plan does not exist."

Senators present are Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly, Janette Millin Young, Marvin Blyden, Sammuell Sanes. Novell Francis, and Dwayne M. DeGraff. **Photo:**  
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