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COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

CHAIRWOMAN SENATOR GENEVIEVE R. WHITAKER

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VIRGIN ISLANDS DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES

TESTIMONY ON WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT/VOCATIONAL
REHABILITATION/EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

PRESENTED BY COMMISSIONER KIMBERLEY CAUSEY-GOMEZ
Good Afternoon Honorable Senator Genevieve R. Whitaker, Chairwoman of the Committee on Education and Workforce Development, Honorable Janelle K. Sarauw, Vice Chair, Committee Members, my colleagues, and the listening and viewing audience. I am Kimberley Causey-Gomez, Commissioner of the Virgin Islands Department of Human Services (DHS). It is our pleasure to appear before this Committee to provide testimony on programs and services regarding workforce development, education and training, vocational rehabilitation, and senior employment opportunities provided by DHS. Joining me today is Michal Rhymer-Browne, Assistant Commissioner, Sharia Green, Administrator of the Division of Division of Disabilities and Rehabilitation Services, Natalie Bailey, Administrator of the Division of Family Assistance, and Cindy Rollins-Williams, Director of the Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP).

DIVISION OF DISABILITIES AND REHABILITATION SERVICES (DRS)

The Virgin Islands Department of Human Services is the designated state agency responsible for the provision of Vocational Rehabilitation Services. The Vocational Rehabilitation Program, commonly known as VR is administered by the U.S. Department of Education and authorized by the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. The goal of the program is to assess, develop, plan, and provide vocational rehabilitation services for persons with disabilities consistent with their unique strengths, abilities, resources, priorities, concerns, interests, and informed choice so that may prepare for and engage in an integrated employment outcome and acquire economic self-sufficiency. The Division of Disabilities and Rehabilitation Services (DRS) consists of four
(4) programs: **Vocational Rehabilitation, Independent Living Services for the Older Blind, Supported Employment, and the Randolph Sheppard Business Entrepreneurial Program.**

The Vocational Rehabilitation Program is the largest component and is designed to ensure that individuals with disabilities overcome their barriers to gainful employment. In collaboration with its core and community partners, the program advocates for and supports the independent living philosophy.

**Eligibility Requirements**

Eligibility is determined based on the following:

- The applicant must have a physical, emotional, cognitive, or learning disability that causes a substantial impediment to employment. Verification of the disability must be provided. Consequently, the Vocational Rehabilitation program pays for medical and psychiatric or psychological assessments, if the applicant is not financially able to cover the costs associated. It should be noted that VR is not a primary payer of medical care but supplements private and/or public health insurance programs.

- The applicant must need the services to prepare, secure, and maintain employment. The program is voluntary, and services are based on your individual needs as determined by your Plan of Employment.

**Vocational Rehabilitation Collaborations**

The program collaborates with internal and external stakeholders such as Disability Rights Center of the Virgin Islands (DRCVI), the Virgin Islands Association for Independent Living, the
Virgin Islands University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (VIUCEDD), Mr. Julien Henley, ADA Coordinator of the Office of the Governor, and various councils and organizations that cater to needs of persons with disabilities. As mandated by the Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act (WIOA), each state or territory is required to submit a Unified or Combined State Plan to the U. S. Department of Labor. Vocational Rehabilitation is engaged with the development and modifications of this Unified plan for the U.S. Virgin Islands. The plan outlines a four-year strategy to align services and programs for jobseekers and businesses. The Vocational Rehabilitation Program is an integral part of the Workforce Development System and as such is a core partner of the American Job Center also known as the One Stop System. Other partners include the Virgin Islands Department of Labor, Virgin Islands Department of Education, Adult Education/Career & Technical Program, and Job Corps.

Upon referrals from the One Stop and various other entities and self-referrals, the following services are offered to eligible participants of the Vocational Rehabilitation Program:

- Vocational Counseling & Guidance.
- Training & Rehabilitation Services to facilitate successful employment outcomes.
- Maintenance for additional costs incurred while an individual is receiving VR services.
- Transition Planning for students enrolled in schools and Pre-Employment Training and Services.
- Development of an Individual Plan of Employment (IPE).
- Educational/Informational Workshops to persons with disabilities about services which they can access to improve their employment outcomes.
- Transportation and travel assistance as related to access VR services.
- Evaluations, Accommodations, and Assistance with job placement.

**Transitioning and Pre-Employment Services**

Transitioning services are designed to help students identify career pathways and build the requisite skill sets that will facilitate the successful transfer into the workforce or post-secondary education. All students who receive special education services have an Individualized Education Program (IEP). The IEP includes information on how students are doing in their classes, their annual educational goals, and accommodations/modifications needed to help students make progress. Beginning with the first IEP meeting, the focus is on the student’s goals, post-high school in education/training, employment, and independent living. The DHS Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors are an important part of the IEP team which also includes the student, his/her parents or guardians, their special education teacher, general education teachers, a school administrator.

Pre-employment transition services represent the earliest set of services available for students with disabilities under the Vocational Rehabilitation program. The services are available to students as early as age 14 and are short-term in nature. Any student with a documented disability can benefit from these services. Additionally, in accordance with the Workforce
Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) the Vocational Rehabilitation program partners with the Department of Education to provide pre-employment transition services to students with disabilities. At least 15% of the program’s federal funds are reserved for these services. The five (5) required Pre-Employment Transition Service Categories are:

- Job exploration counseling including Career Aptitude Assessments.
- Work-based learning experiences, which may include in-school or after school opportunities, or experience outside the traditional school setting (including internships and on the job training), that are provided in an integrated environment.
- Counseling on opportunities for enrollment in postsecondary educational programs at institutions of higher education.
- Workplace readiness training to develop soft skills and independent living skills.
- Instruction in self-advocacy, which may also include peer mentoring and education relative to available accommodations.

Throughout the summer months, students are engaged in employment training where they are placed at various government agencies and private businesses based on their career interests. Some of the placements are done in collaboration with the Virgin Islands Department of Labor. Students have been offered full-time employment opportunities as a result of their participation in the VR summer employment training program. In the past, the VR Program has partnered with local farmers to provide hands-on training to students in Agricultural Science. The students learned about land irrigation, soil preparation, seeding germination and marketing.
During the COVID-19 Pandemic, the DHS VR program launched our first online pre-employment training series that provided information around our core subject areas. Participating students were provided insight on career opportunities, interviewing techniques, resume building and employer expectations. We are now conducting our Spring sessions which began in February 2021 and will run for approximately 10 weeks. The students will receive a stipend for their participation.

**Supported Employment**

Another key component of the VR Program is Supported Employment Services. Supported Employment is a mandated service that caters to the severely disabled population that cannot benefit from traditional employment opportunities and requires on the job support for a specific amount of time. The VR program has struggled to secure and maintain certified and consistent Job Coaches in the territory. The VR program receives a small grant for the provision of these services. Recently, we partnered with a local private provider, Island Therapy Solutions to provide job development, placement, and support to selected participants.

**Randolph Sheppard Business Entrepreneurial Program**

I am pleased to announce that after being dormant for many years, DHS has successfully reactivated the Randolph Sheppard Business Entrepreneurial Program in the territory. The federal Randolph Sheppard Program, signed into law in 1936 by then President Franklin D. Roosevelt, is designed to assist talented and creative individuals who are legally blind, to acquire
management training and business skills necessary to realize the American dream of becoming business owners. On March 1st of this year, our Vocational Rehabilitation staff was proud to see one of their legally blind clients implement a soft opening of the cafe in the Ron de Lugo Federal Building in the St. Thomas/St. John District. The Operator, assisted by our VR staff, worked diligently to acquire all the certifications, clearances and licensure required to begin operations. She is not only employed but is now a proud business owner. DHS encourages the community to support the Café in the Ron de Lugo Federal Building.

We are truly excited about the possibilities that will be bore from this achievement. As the host agency, we can work with businesses or government agencies that are interested in providing their customers with on-site food, concessions, vending or snack stations. This initiative will help to build the economy while providing viable opportunities for Virgin Islanders that are visually impaired.

Currently, the VR Program assists approximately 300 plus participants territory wide and averages about 52 successful closures per year. The program is committed to serving the needs of the population to ensure that persons living with a disability in the territory can lead independent lives. One of the major challenges for the program is the lack of training and certification programs available. As we evaluate the demand sectors, there are not many entry-level positions available, and employers are requiring job seekers to have the requisite skill sets. This creates a significant gap between what is available in the job market and the employability...
of the job seekers. Ongoing education and sensitivity training of private and public sector employers will be a major priority of DHS. It is our hope that increasing our outreach and community education will help to reinforce the goals and mission of the VR Program and facilitate an inclusive workforce in the territory.

DIVISION OF FAMILY ASSISTANCE SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITIONAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (SNAP) EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING (E&T)

In accordance with the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), Title 7, Subtitle B, Chapter II, Subchapter C, Part 273, Subpart C 273.7, DHS is required to design and operate an Employment and Training (E&T) program that consists of case management services and at least one or more, or a combination of, employment and/or training components. The purpose of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) E&T program is to assist members of SNAP households in gaining skills, training, work, or experience that will improve their employment prospects and reduce their reliance on SNAP benefits.

The Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) provides state agencies with federal grants to fund the administrative costs of an E&T program. E&T grants vary based on the number of work registrants and Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWDs) in a state. These grants are called 100% funds and must be used on the planning, implementation, and operation of a state E&T program. One hundred percent money cannot be used for any participant reimbursements, or support services, such as transportation or uniforms. VIDHS 100% annual grant ranged
between $50,000 - $60,000. In 2016, DHS received a one-time award of $425,000 additional 100% funding and successfully expanded the case management and training programs offered to SNAP recipients.

Historically, DHS has operated a mandatory SNAP E&T program and partnered with the VI Department of Labor (VIDOL) to provide case management and employment/training components. A mandatory SNAP E&T program requires that as a condition of eligibility, all individuals applying for SNAP benefits, who did not meet one of the exemptions, were referred to VIDOL and required to participate in the E&T program. Therefore, recipients who failed to comply with the E&T program requirements, without “good cause” lost their benefits.

Currently, DHS is collaborating with our federal partners at FNS, North East Regional Office (NERO), to successfully switch from a mandatory to voluntary SNAP E&T program. The program redesigning will include the following:

- Development of an internal comprehensive case management component and referral process which will be incorporated into the new Virgin Islands Integrated Benefits Eligibility System (VIBES).
- Establish and maintain collaborative relationships with community and government agency stakeholders, to guide industry driven service provider agreements, designed to increase recipient participation in the program.
Develop and implement a process for collecting and reporting performance measures in accordance with federal regulations.

- Emphasized service delivery to identified target group based upon existing data analysis.
- Annual Territory-wide SNAP E&T outreach/education campaign

The SNAP E&T includes approximately 5,220 total recipients: 3,020 in St. Thomas, 1,630 in St. Croix and 570 in St. John. As part of the overall Strategic Plan for DHS, a creation of an Employment and Training Unit, within the Division of Family Assistance which will combine the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program- Employment & Training (SNAP E&T) and the TANF Job Opportunity and Basic Skills (JOBS) program is forthcoming. This new unit will enable DHS to maximize available resources and eliminate duplication of services as we operate both program in accordance with separate federal guidelines.

**Employment and Training (E&T)**

The Virgin Islands Department of Human Services Division of Family Assistance also administers the federal **Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Employment and Training** currently known as the **Jobs Opportunities Basic Skills (JOBS) Program**. The JOBS program provides services to Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) recipients by moving them from dependency to self-sufficiency in preparation for work. On July 1, 1997, the Virgin Islands joined the rest of the nation in the reform of Welfare. Federal law required all
TANF recipients to participate in work or work activities after two (2) years of assistance. Failure to comply would result in a financial penalty for the Territory. Federal law limits financial assistance to a lifetime limit of 60 months.

The main goal of the JOBS Program is to provide services which would enable TANF recipients to become economically self-sufficient by identifying and facilitating unique opportunities for the recipients to acquire work. This is done through forging public and private sector partnerships with government and non-profit agencies and private businesses to increase the number of individuals entering the workforce. Our key performance measure is for TANF recipients to obtain and retain employment prior to the expiration of their lifetime limit of 60 TANF months unless a recipient is granted a waiver for three (3) months Transitional Employment or extreme Family Violence.

- Eligible applicants must be age 16 and older.
- The federal lifetime limit for TANF benefits is 60 months or 5 years.
- As of 2002, there is a 50% federal minimum caseload requirement for recipients to be in a work activity each year.
- All TANF recipients must participate in a work activity except for the following conditions for TANF Recipients Heads of Household who: Are in the third trimester of their pregnancy; Have a child under 6 months old; Have a child under 6 years and does not have child care; or Are Caring for child with a disability.
JOBS Program TANF Work Activity

The federal government requires all TANF recipients to participate in a work activity unless the recipient is exempted or waived. To qualify with federal regulations, a work activity must be 30 hours per week or longer except for job readiness components. The work activities are as follows:

- Unsubsidized Employment
- Subsidized Private-Sector Employment
- Subsidized Public-Sector Employment Work Experience is any knowledge enhancing or skill-enhancing services provided to an employer by a customer in exchange for training needed to make that customer more marketable for three months with a legitimate job vacancy during which time they are rigorously evaluated. Upon satisfactory completion, the employer is strongly encouraged to hire the participant. It should be noted that during the initial American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) federal funding, the Department of Human Services, other Virgin Islands government agencies, and private-non-profit agencies participated in a Subsidized Public-Sector and Private Public-Sector Employment Work Experience with JOBS, where over 20 JOBS participants were placed in departments and agencies. Many of these participants were able to obtain permanent employment thereafter and gained valuable work-experience. DHS will be moving forward in the near future with other Subsidized Employment Work Experiences for our JOBS participants.
On-the-Job Training which is any knowledge or skill enhancing service provided to an employer by a customer as a pre-condition of hire and/or on a post-hire basis. To ensure the recipient is guaranteed employment, the Department of Human Services-JOBS Program has partnered with the Department of Labor-Work Investment Opportunity Act for recipients to take advantage of training opportunities. The Department of Labor will also offer a Work Opportunity Tax Credit to employers who meet the eligibility requirements for hiring Vocational Rehabilitation clients.

Education Directly Related to Employment for Individuals with No High School Diploma or Certificate of High School Equivalency is theoretical and/or practical instruction provided to a recipient to assist said recipient obtain the necessary knowledge and/or skills for employment. Unless exempt, the recipient must be enrolled in a school component within the first 24 months of enrollment in the program base on need.

Satisfactory School Attendance for Individuals with No High School Diploma or Certificate of High School Equivalency is academic instruction intended to assist a customer obtain a Highschool Diploma or Certificate or High School Equivalency.

Other approved TANF Employment Work Activities include:

- Job Search and Pre-employment Assistance
- Community Service in non-profits and government agencies
- Career Technical or Vocational Educational Training is general, theoretical and/or practical instruction provided to a customer in a particular skill or discipline that would
help the customer become more marketable. DHS will be moving forward with a re-designed and re-energized Action Plan for our JOBS participants in 2021 in Career Technical Training with an emphasis on high demand jobs in our territory.

The Department of Human Services TANF/JOBS Program will undergo a Re-Design, Active Recruitment, and will be renamed in 2021. It has been almost twenty-five (25) years since Welfare Reform transformed the way the federal government operated Cash Assistance programs to low-income and indigent families. The University of the Virgin Islands Caribbean Exploratory Research Center on Health Disparities completed a Research Project focused on the Virgin Islands TANF Employment and Training program. This Research will serve as the catalyst for improving our DHS TANF Employment and Training Program as we move forward in assisting our TANF clients to not only get a Job, but to take the necessary steps on a Career Pathway and qualify for higher paying jobs and more stable jobs and careers to achieve self-sufficiency for themselves and their families.

**THE DIVISION OF SENIOR CITIZEN AFFAIRS**

The DHS Division of Senior Citizen Affairs is the U.S. Department of Labor grantee of the Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP). SCSEP is a community service and work-based training program for older workers who are 55 years of age and older, unemployed, and have a family income of no more than 125% of the federal poverty level. It was first authorized under Title II of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 and funded in 1965
as part of a demonstration project called Operation Mainstream but later transitioned to an established program under the Older Americans Act. In 1978, it was redesignated under Title V of the Older Americans Act and this is still the statutory authorization of the program today. SCSEP has operated within the Virgin Islands for over 35 years.

SCSEP enrollees gain work experience in a variety of community service activities in non-profit and public facilities, including but not limited to schools, hospitals, child care programs, and senior centers. They work an average of 20 hours a week, and are paid the highest of federal, state, or local minimum wages. In the Virgin Islands SCSEP enrollees earn $10.50 per hour. Their community service training and subsidized employment serves as a bridge to unsubsidized employment opportunities. While enrolled in SCSEP, Seniors receive personalized help in meeting employment goals which prepare them to enter or re-enter the job market.

**SCSEP Priority Groups**

The priority group for program enrollment is given to veterans and their eligible spouses, if their discharge was not dishonorable. The second priority group for program enrollment is given to individuals with at least one of the following characteristics:

- Are 65 years of age or older.
- Have limited English skills.
- Have low reading, writing and math skills.
- Live in a rural area.
Need extra support and training to secure employment.

Did not get a job after receiving employment services from an American Job Center.

Are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

SCSEP Enrollees are “Experienced, Responsible, Qualified, and Talented.” As we often share with our Employers and the wider public when speaking about SCSEP, “Age is an asset. Experience a benefit. Hire A Senior Worker Today!”

This concludes my presentation. I would like to personally thank our Department of Human Services team of professionals who have been on the front lines providing direct services to our Virgin Islands community throughout the COVID-19 Pandemic. DHS is committed to “Working Together to Make A Difference”. It has been my pleasure to provide you with information on just a few of the programs and services offered under the VI Department of Human Services umbrella. My team and I are available to answer any questions you may have specifically regarding our testimony today.