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Early Childhood Development Efforts Hindered by Resource Crunch; Millions in Federal Grant Dollars Going Unclaimed

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Amid mounting pressures from educators protesting working conditions in St. Croix's public schools, the Senate Committee on Education and Workforce Development convened on Thursday to discuss the broader issues affecting child care in the territory.

Committee Chair Senator Marise James recently met with officials of the Dept. of Education and Board of Education, addressing both the protests and the challenges faced by entities like Lutheran Social Services of the Virgin Islands and the V.I. Dept. of Human Services in expanding child care services. These difficulties were discussed even as \$16 million in federal funding remains unspent.

Declining to discuss specifics, the senator however noted that the commissioner of Education as well as the district Education Superintendent “were both able to respond to the list that was put out by the St. Croix AFT concerning issues.”

The ongoing job action notwithstanding, the focus of this week’s hearing was on early childhood development. As such, testifiers from LSS, DHS and other agencies spoke of their efforts and challenges when it came to the social, cognitive, and academic development of the territory’s youngest citizens.

LSS, which offers “Early Head Start” programming for children from birth to age three, says that limited funds make meeting federal match requirements for grant funds an onerous task. Junia John-Straker, LSS CEO, said the organization also struggles to field competitive wages to attract and retain employees. “We are unable to compete with Education and Head Start...for staffing,” she lamented. However, DHS Assistant Commissioner Carla Benjamin said that her department, which administers the Head Start program, has similar challenges. “We can compete with the Department of Education until the next union negotiations, pretty much,” Ms. Benjamin asserted. “We joke about it all the time.”

Despite the funding challenges, both programs are working hard to serve the children of the territory, according to the organizations' leaders. Ms. John-Straker told lawmakers that the Early Head Start program accommodates 120 families across their programs, while Ms. Benjamin disclosed that the Head Start program has an enrollment of almost 800 students. However, the resource crunch means expanding the service offerings is a challenge. Ms. John-Straker noted that there were several families who qualify but are not able to be accommodated in the Early Head Start program. Of the 120-family capacity, she said “I would love to double that but can't do it because of the lack of resources.”

That same lack of resources has prevented the program, established on St. Croix twenty years ago, from expanding to St. Thomas. “One of the directors many years ago really wanted our next center to be on St. Thomas. But Early Head Start is really specific as to the setup of the classroom, the space per child,” Ms. John-Straker explained, saying that renting an appropriate space on St. Thomas has proven prohibitively expensive. Senator Carla Joseph suggested exploring collaborations with other organizations that may be willing to share space.

Meanwhile, Ms. Benjamin disclosed that a space to accommodate St. Johnian Head Start students was currently under construction, six years after the 2017 hurricanes destroyed the previous accommodation.

Recent adjustments to policy mean that essential workers are now “categorically eligible” for childcare subsidies, regardless of income, Ms. Benjamin stated. Sen. Joseph hailed the development as a “huge accomplishment,” noting that especially for essential workers, ensuring their children are “being taken care of in a safe haven” is an important concern. Sen. Joseph also felt positive about having children from a more diverse mix of backgrounds included in the programs. “You’re not just limiting it now to people who are [at] poverty level...I’m getting really excited about that,” she said.

Discussion also touched on private childcare providers, particularly the slow uptake of federal grant funding for the upgrade of their services and facilities. “We’re going to do some engagement to try to figure out why some childcare providers have not applied because the federal government has made it very easy,” said Ms. Benjamin, referring to \$23 million in Child Care Stabilization grants from the American Rescue Plan Act that has been [allocated for local childcare providers](#) to

defray operational and some capital costs. Only \$7 million of that sum has been disbursed thus far because “we don’t have enough childcare providers in the pool of providers probably to utilize our \$23 million,” Ms. Benjamin said, prompting committee chair Sen. Marise James to issue an appeal to childcare providers across the territory. “We have approximately 16 million dollars to give you. You need to apply because it would only improve your facilities”

Meanwhile, Senator Donna Frett-Gregory expressed concerns that relevant data is still not being captured for young Virgin Islands in what is supposed to have been a “cradle-to-grave” [information system](#) used to drive policy in the territory. “Unless we are collecting the data and following our babies, we are not going to be able to address the challenges that we have around identifying our students with cognitive and behavioral issues,” she said.

However, Dr. Charmaine Myers, Maternal Child Health director at the V.I. Department of Health, said that despite a belated start due to the pandemic, as well as personnel issues, a screening program for children from birth to eight years has been running since 2021. Over 500 children across the territory have been screened for emotional, cognitive, and social challenges since then. Dr. Myers indicated that plans are to transition the program to a new grant heading which will allow for screenings up to age 21. The department is also working with pediatric providers to identify potential behavioral health issues so that patients can gain access to appropriate mental health support.

Towards the end of the session, testifiers expressed gratitude to committee members for the opportunity to air their concerns and challenges surrounding the administration and development of early childhood programs in the territory, while lawmakers vowed to support efforts to improve and expand the programs as much as they could.