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# Senate Committee Advances Bill on Mobile Integrated Healthcare Program

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On Wednesday, the Senate Committee on Health, Hospitals, and Human Services gave a favorable vote on Act 35-0119, a measure seeking to enhance community healthcare by directing the Department of Health to develop Mobile Integrated Healthcare (MIH) programs.

Senator Marise James, the bill's sponsor, emphasized that the main objective of the legislation is to "improve the overall health and safety of our population." MIH focuses on delivering patient-centered healthcare in an out-of-hospital environment. The senator highlighted the benefits of MIH, indicating that it would reduce the pressure on emergency medical services, enabling them to concentrate on high-priority, life-threatening calls.

Ms. James further explained that MIH programs primarily target historically underserved communities, which stand to benefit from a range of vital out-of-hospital services. DOH had previously initiated a community para-medicine program following Hurricanes Irma and Maria. However, the proposed MIH is intended to provide a more comprehensive and inclusive medical support system.

Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion, alongside other health leaders from the territory, supported the draft legislation, emphasizing the need to enhance the current MIH program. As per Ms. Encarnacion, the MIH initiative began as a St. Croix pilot project, funded via the Emergency Medical Services budget with support from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, Pafford, and the private sector. But due to financial constraints and the challenges in hiring adequate staff, it couldn't be expanded to St. Thomas and St. John. Encarnacion reported that 89 patients are presently under weekly care, with 16 referrals awaiting action. She also highlighted concerns regarding Pafford's future in the territory. Without legislative intervention through the pending bill, she warned, "the Virgin Islands will be left without this needed service on St. Croix and would not be able to expand services to the St. Thomas/St. John district."

Dr. Tess Richards, interim executive director of the St. Thomas East End Medical Center Corporation, endorsed the MIH program for its potential to reduce the pressure on the island's sole emergency department at the Schneider Regional Medical Center. Dr. Richards also highlighted the benefits of the MIH program in reducing hospital readmissions.

Tina Commissiong, the Schneider Regional chief executive officer, viewed the proposed legislation as an opportunity to enhance "primary care options for those most in need," thereby making a positive impact on the territory's overall healthcare system. She voiced hope for adequate legislative funding to ensure the program's efficiency and success.

After an extensive debate and testimony session, eight senators unanimously voted in favor of Bill 35-0119, with Senator Ray Fonseca noting the significance of the bill. The Rules & Judiciary committee will now further review and vet the proposed legislation.