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Bill to Honor Dr. Alfred O. Heath Becomes Discussion on Reopening Senior Care Facility He Founded

Senate / **Published On October 27, 2023 06:15 AM /**

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Dr. Alfred O. Heath. By. THE UNIVERSITY OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

There may soon be a new bust at Education Park in St. Thomas, as a bill to honor Dr. Alfred O. Heath was voted upon favorably this week in the Senate Committee on Government Operations, Veteran Affairs & Consumer Protection. As a testament to the power of his lifetime of service to the public, a discussion on his achievements became a clarion call for legislators to work towards re-opening a critical medical care facility.

First, however, Senator Ray Fonseca, the bill's sponsor, provided an extensive list of Dr. Heath's accomplishments and involvement in several organizations. Apart from a 40-year commitment to the military, the 93-year old doctor also served as commissioner of Health from 1973 to 1976, and

from 1979 to 1983. He also served as the chief executive officer/medical director of the Schneider Regional Medical Center from 1981 to 1987.

Dr. David Hall, president of the University of the Virgin Islands, provided testimony focusing on Dr. Heath's contributions to the university. "His presence, insights and service have made a tremendous difference in the quality and stature of UVI," he said. Apart from serving on the university's Board of Trustees for 18 years, Dr. Heath also chaired UVI's foundation.

"The Foundation is critical to the university's success," Mr. Hall explained, "because it makes financial contributions to the operating budget from the endowment that it oversees. Dr. Heath as its leader was an unwavering supporter of UVI." The university, Mr. Hall disclosed, has bestowed its own honors on Dr. Heath – elevating him to the status of Trustee Emeritus in 1997, and granting him an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters degree in 2012. "Through his efforts, Dr. Heath positively impacted the lives of countless individuals, embodying the true essence of a caring and altruistic physician," said Mr. Hall.

Testifier Dr. Cora Christian told lawmakers that listing all of Dr. Heath's accomplishments in the proposed legislation "would require a book-sized document." She highlighted his founding of the "first and only certified skilled nursing facility in the Virgin Islands, Seaview, where older patients could receive first-class care."

Turning the conversation towards policy, Dr. Sidney Commissiong asked lawmakers to assist in re-opening Seaview, "as it is desperately needed". Later on, while responding to Senator Milton Potter, Dr. Commissiong noted that Dr. Heath "didn't build Seaview for money – as a matter of fact he lost money. He did that for the community." Once again, he begged lawmakers to step in. "Senators, do your best to get that open, we really need that facility."

Senator Marvin Blyden disclosed that efforts to do just that are already underway. "I do have authorship of that legislation," he said. "I look forward to working with my colleagues and [the] administration in terms of the funding and ensuring that we can move forward." His fellow committee members also voiced their support for that request. "I would absolutely be supportive of any move to purchase Seaview and ensure that it continues to provide important service to the people of the Virgin Islands," said Sen. Potter, a co-sponsor of Tuesday's bill to honor Dr. Heath.

Sen. Fonseca noted wistfully that had Seaview been open, its founder could have been housed in the facility. "Right now he has to be up in Virginia receiving care when he should be here." Dr. Commissiong agreed. "I think it's really a shame that the man who built Seaview can't enjoy it because it's not working anymore."

Dr. Christian urged lawmakers to understand that "this is an investment not only in reference to our people, but in reference to the wider needs of our community. We are a community that is aging, and this is going to become more and more of a problem." In closing, she argued that in addition to the bust in Education Park, the funding and reopening of Seaview "would be a tremendous honor to Dr. Heath's legacy as well."