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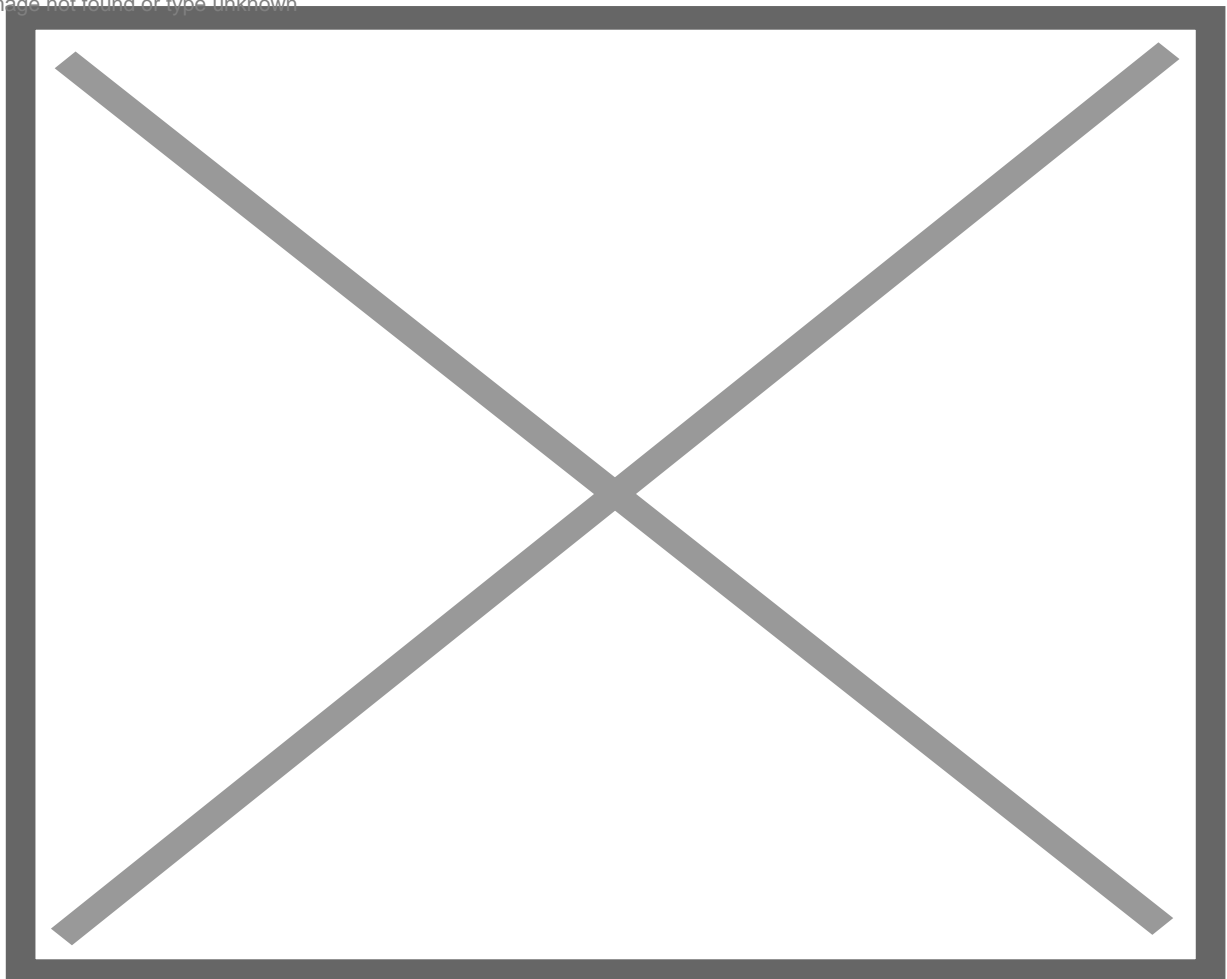
Urgent Legislation Passed for School Health Staffing in Virgin Islands

Senator Gittens champions Bill No. 35-0194 to address the shortage of medical staff in schools

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Legislation to address the dire need for medical professionals within the territory's public schools easily passed Wednesday's meeting of the Committee on Health, Hospitals and Human Services.

Bill No. 35-0194, sponsored by Senator Kenneth Gittens, proposes the hiring of school health technicians by the commissioner of Education for each public school, to generally assume the role and responsibilities of school nurses.

Mr. Gittens, who observed that several of the territory's schools do not currently have school nurses on staff, begged for support from his Senate colleagues, and explained that "it has become

extremely difficult to recruit and retain registered nurses, [as] one of the factors is that they can make more money elsewhere....This has left a huge gap in our schools where there's no one assigned to distribute medication to students who need it and no one on hand to administer basic first aid."

Across the two school districts, nine vacancies for school nurses exist. During the hearing, representatives of the Department of Education disclosed that at least one additional school nurse had recently resigned to take up a higher-paying post elsewhere.

For Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion, the proposed legislation is timely, as conversations on the constant need for medical professionals in schools hit a fever pitch when the pandemic started. "Having a certified school health technician in every public school will provide support to the clinical aspect of care of students in the absence of a registered nurse," affirmed Ms. Encarnacion. With the Department of Health playing a major role in the creation of Bill No. 35-0194, the commissioner argued that "the advantages of this practice are extensive."

The Department of Education is also supporting the measure, with Deputy Commissioner Victor Somme III noting that "healthcare is tantamount to student achievement." Mr. Somme, too, highlighted the dearth of school nurses, and lamented that "the department is not able to compete with nursing salaries offered by both hospitals and private medical practices." ‘

Under the proposed legislation, the commissioner of Education would be responsible for hiring a school nurse supervisor in each district to directly supervise the school health technicians. That school nurse supervisor is expected to possess the qualifications of either a registered nurse, physician's assistant or physician, while the health technicians in schools could be LPNs, CNAs, or EMTs. Further, the commissioner of Education would also be required to develop a job description and standard operating procedures to include telehealth options for both the school nurse supervisors and school health technicians. Those details must then be forwarded to the commissioner of Health for approval.

While legislators largely supported the bill, some concerns arose over the ability to attract qualified individuals, potential liability issues, telehealth considerations and remuneration. School nurses currently receive the same starting salary as teachers, approximately \$49,000 a year based on the collective bargaining agreement with the American Federation of Teachers. Mr. Somme informed Committee chair Senator Fonseca that "we are currently in negotiations, and the pay scales will change based on what the government can afford."

The legislation will now move forward to the full body for consideration and approval.