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USVI Moves to Strengthen Maritime Workforce with New Scholarship Program

Senate Committee approves bill to aid students pursuing maritime careers

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Crew members on a seaman ship diligently working on deck, using a flex machine grinder for cutting tasks after the cargo carriage. This activity is part of routine boat or vessel maintenance. By. GETTY IMAGES

Lawmakers on the Senate Committee on Budget, Appropriations and Finance are hopeful that new legislation will help bridge the personnel gap in the territory's maritime sector by providing financial support to students who wish to study within that field.

Bill 35-0133, sponsored by Senator Angel Bolques, seeks to “establish an educational scholarship program to support individuals interested in pursuing a career in the maritime industry,” by making amendments to Chapter 17 of the Virgin Islands Code. Mr. Bolques anticipates that, if passed, the bill would positively impact the territory “on so many different levels.” The sentiment was shared among fellow legislators and educators alike as the proposed bill received overwhelming support.

Maritime Industry Educational Scholarship Bill Provisions

1. Development of Guidelines:

- The Board of Education shall develop guidelines, procedures, and criteria for the application process, scholarship selection, and fund disbursement.

2. Eligibility:

- Applicants must be residents of the Virgin Islands.
- Demonstrated interest in pursuing a career in the maritime industry.
- Eligible applicants include high school graduates, college students, or individuals seeking enrollment in accredited maritime educational programs.

3. Selection Process:

- The Board of Education will establish a fair and transparent process to select scholarship recipients.

4. Scholarship Details:

- Scholarships may not exceed \$10,000 per year.
- Funds can be used for tuition, lodging, board, transportation, and other related expenses.
- Duration of each scholarship is up to four years.
- Funds released upon formal acceptance at an educational institution.

5. Contractual Obligation:

- Scholarship recipients must sign a contract to return and work in the Virgin Islands' maritime industry upon completion of their studies.
- Failure to comply will result in liability for the scholarship amount.

6. Residency Requirement for Applicants:

- Applicants must have been residents of the Virgin Islands for at least two years prior to application, with exceptions for those temporarily abroad for study or military service.

7. Record Keeping and Reporting:

- The Board of Education will maintain records of the program's administration.
- An annual report on the program's outcomes and impact will be submitted to the Governor and the Legislature.

8. Outreach and Promotion:

- The Board will conduct outreach to promote awareness of the scholarship.
- Information, application details, and deadlines to be available on the Board's website and other platforms.

9. Funding:

- Legislature authorized to appropriate funds annually for the Virgin Islands Maritime Industry Educational Scholarship Fund.
- Appropriated funds to remain available until expended.

Kyza Callwood, chair of the Virgin Islands Board of Education, remarked that establishing this special scholarship “holds significant importance.” He spoke about the benefits of such financial assistance and how these programs aid in “addressing [the] skill gap,” “contribute to economic growth” and “ensure a competent workforce.” The scholarship, he noted, will “indirectly contribute to promoting safe practices and preventing maritime incidents.”

Similar sentiments were shared by Victor Somme III, assistant education commissioner. He testified that the maritime industry remains a “cornerstone” of the territory, making the scholarship “essential for both individual success and the prosperity of the territory.” Mr. Somme predicted that the scholarship would “open doors for students who may be otherwise unable to pursue their interest in the maritime industry.” He also commented on the perceived lack of diversity within the maritime sector, noting that the scholarship could help promote “a variety of perspectives.”

The University of the Virgin Islands, too, was pleased with the initiative. Camille McKayle, vice president of academic affairs, lauded the legislature and hoped it would “increase interest in [the] maritime industry in the Virgin Islands.” Bill Rawlins, assistant executive director of the Virgin Islands Port Authority was equally excited. He commended the section of the proposed legislation that would mandate scholarship recipients to return to the territory to work but called for a minimum timeframe to be set in stone. Students who are unable to find a job within the sector upon completion of their program will not be required to remain in the territory. Nonetheless, Mr. Rawlins anticipated the creation of “a pool of qualified and employable maritime professionals.”

Endorsements were also received from representatives of Gold Coast Yacht, the Virgin Islands Charter Association, and World Ocean School. Several lawmakers, including committee chair Sen. Donna Frett-Gregory agreed that the bill was long overdue. She lamented a dearth of previous initiatives to “[spark] the interest” of young children within the maritime sector. It was on this basis that she proposed that two scholarships be awarded to each district annually, so as to “play catch up.”

Apart from administering the scholarship, the legislation mandates that the Board of Education hold a student who does not comply with the terms of the scholarship liable to the Government of the Virgin Islands. A note of caution was sounded as Dr. Callwood warned that the Board’s “small skeleton staff” may have challenges in monitoring the status of students. He called for “more persons on deck to ensure that we could continuously monitor this requirement.” His comments applied to all special scholarships.

The introduction of the special maritime scholarship was regarded as progress within the local blue economy and a milestone marker toward Vision 2040. Voted upon favorably by all present members, an amended version of the bill will proceed to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary for further consideration.

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