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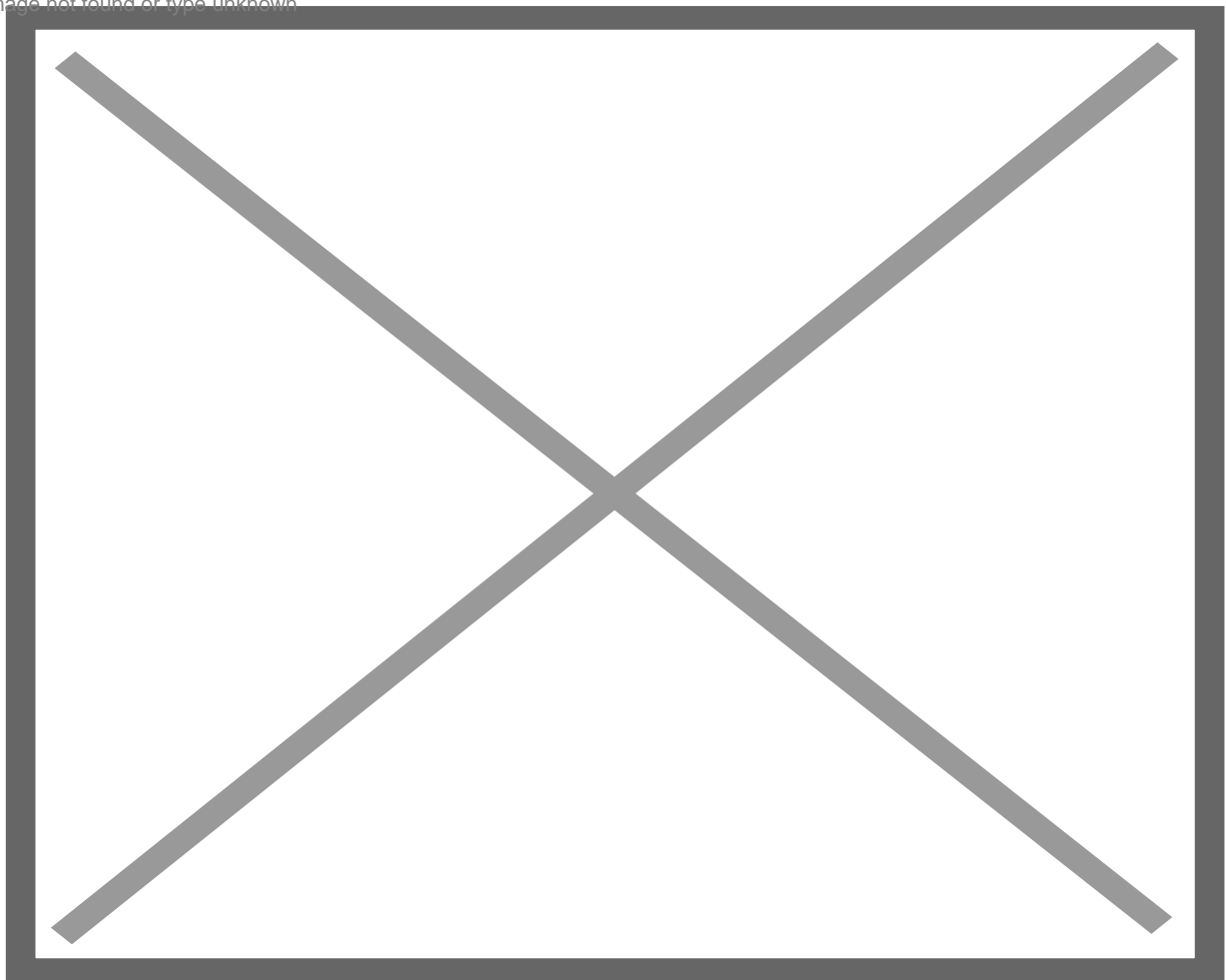
Bill to Provide Increased Access to Behavioral Services Held in Committee by Sponsor

Funding and implementation challenges raised in legislative debate on mental health bill

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Proposed legislation aiming to amend Virgin Islands Code to “increase access to behavioral services” was held in the Committee on Health, Hospitals, and Human Services by its bill sponsor, Senator Diane Capehart.

If passed, Bill 35-0224 would have created a Psychiatric Emergency Response Team to provide mobile crisis intervention services, and also would formalize the 9-8-8 telecommunication system. In her introduction of the bill, Ms. Capehart explained that the measure would create “a community intervention team that provides emergency assessment and referral for individuals in behavioral health crises.” It would involve training peace officers, as well as providing a funding

source to allow the Bureau of Corrections to “offer training and some services to the correction officers.” Nursing staff who attend to patients during mental health episodes would also be trained. Under Bill 35-0224, a “9-8-8 trust fund” would be established to “fund the service,” Ms. Capehart said.

A loud supporter of the measure was the V.I. Fire and Emergency Management Service. Assistant Director of EMS, Lisle Evelyn, testified that this legislation was a “crucial step in addressing the mental health needs of our residents.” Establishing a psychiatric emergency response team (PERT) is a “commendable initiative that aligns with best practices in emergency medical services,” Mr. Evelyn said. He anticipated that trained individuals would be able to offer a more “empathetic and informed response.”

Speaking on behalf of the Department of Health, Commissioner Justa Encarnacion said she was pleased with the “formalization of the National 9-8-8 suicide and crisis lifeline.” She described it as “a beacon of hope offering a genuine opportunity with timely intervention.” She also used the opportunity to address cost concerns relating to the 9-8-8 hotline, stating that “preventing an escalation of behavioral health crises... can alleviate the burden on emergency services.”

The hotline, Ms. Encarnacion said, is an “investment in the collective well-being of our community.” It has been federally mandated that the hotline be consistently funded, and Ms. Encarnacion told lawmakers that DOH will “request \$1.1 million annually within our general fund to ensure access to crisis intervention.”

The conversation seemed to frustrate Senator Novelle Francis, who said that the territory “lacked real action in being able to address this issue.” “We continue to have these circular discussions in regards to behavioral health,” he lamented. Committee Chair Ray Fonseca agreed, and complained that the territory is not “putting enough resources into the behavioral health areas.”

Meanwhile, Senator Milton Potter expressed concern over the DOH’s ability to implement the bill. Ms. Encarnacion assured him that it would be manageable. Notwithstanding, Senator Donna Frett-Gregory requested the DOH’s “strategic plan around that specific measure.”

Ms. Frett-Gregory also questioned the funding source for the aforementioned 9-8-8 trust fund. “I’m not sure what the sponsor of the legislation is looking at when it comes to the fund,” she said. The source of funds is an “important component to the success of this legislation,” the budget committee chair warned.

With no new revenue available, DOH said it intends to meet with the Office of Management and Budget to identify areas within this year’s budget that could be reduced to create the \$1.1 million needed to establish the 24/7 hotline, which would be staffed by therapists as opposed to hotline operators with no specific training in psychology. Assuring that she was not downplaying the importance of the measure, Ms. Frett-Gregory wanted to ensure that it could be “implemented in earnest.”

Despite the lengthy discussion on the matter, it was the bill sponsor herself who ultimately moved a motion to hold the bill in Committee. She had informed her colleagues of pending amendments to the bill, but announced that she would be “happy to hold this legislation” if the amendments were not ready by the end of the Committee meeting. Inclement weather conditions in St. Croix prematurely ended the meeting, making Ms. Capehart’s motion the last item on the agenda.