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USVI Moves to Combat Rising Diabetes and Kidney Disease with New Registry Bill

Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion advocates for data-driven approach amid alarming disease rates

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Legislation seeking to establish a Territorial Chronic Kidney Disease and Diabetes Registry in the USVI moved easily through the Committee on Health, Hospitals, and Human Services on Wednesday.

Bill 35-0207, sponsored by Senator Ray Fonseca is about “investing \$250,000 to be able to monitor and to track and to save and extend the lives of all of the Virgin Islanders that are currently suffering from kidney failure...[and] diabetes.”

Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion testified in support of the measure. She anticipates that if the bill is enacted into law, the registry that would be established would “serve as a pivotal shift in our approach and medical management of chronic kidney disease and diabetes.” In 2016, diabetes affected 12.7% or 10,382 people in the territory, and since then prevalence has been “increasing at an alarming rate” the commissioner informed lawmakers, “causing significant health, economic and social challenges.”

Chronic kidney disease and diabetes are “preventable conditions that contribute significantly to disease burden in the U.S.,” stated Ms. Encarnacion. She lauded the establishment of the registry as a “useful tool to aid health systems professionals” collect data and track trends. That will make it possible to create “data-driven insights to shape preventative public health strategies.” The commissioner further detailed how the registry could guide resource allocation, inform infrastructure planning, and assist clinicians in auditing their “practice patterns and standards of care.”

“Successful implementation of this registry requires collaboration and cooperation of healthcare systems, healthcare providers and members of the community,” noted the health commissioner. She promised the utmost privacy and adherence to data protection on the part of the Department of Health.

Lawmakers agreed that the registry would be a vital resource for healthcare professionals. Among them, Senators Novelle Francis, Diane Capehart, and Milton Potter. The latter wondered how the registry would support “targeted outreach and care coordination efforts.” DOH Medical Director Dr. Tai Hunte-Caesar told Mr. Potter that the data collected by the registry could also be used to determine the “social determinants of health.”

For healthcare professionals, social determinants of health are the factors that lead to diseases like diabetes and chronic kidney disease. “That’s going to show us what we need to do,” Dr. Hunte-Caesar said. That knowledge will help the Department of Health “better serve” affected members of the community. The registry was characterized as a “treasure trove of data” by Mr. Potter.

Senator Donna Frett-Gregory, chair of the Committee on Budget, Appropriations and Finance, voiced her usual concern over funding. “I know what the challenges that we have are,” she said, referring to the \$250,000 price tag. The senator called for further discussion and asked that the draft legislation be forwarded to the “appropriate” committee after it passes the initial stage.

Mr. Fonseca’s first attempt at a motion proposed that the legislation be sent to the Rules and Judiciary Committee, however he withdrew following prompting by the budget committee chair, and instead asked his colleagues to support the bill being handed to the Budget, Appropriations and Finance committee for vetting.

Bill 35-0207 received favorable votes from the five present members of the Health, Hospitals and Human Services Committee. Shortly thereafter, the hearing was adjourned due to deteriorating weather conditions on St. Croix.