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Bill to Establish Chronic Disease Registry Wins Unanimous Senate Support

Lawmakers endorse proposal for diabetes and kidney disease tracking in the USVI

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During Tuesday's meeting of the Senate Committee on Budget, Appropriations and Finance, lawmakers were unanimously supportive of a bill brought by Senator Ray Fonseca to establish a registry to track chronic kidney disease and diabetes in the territory.

As he introduced the draft bill, which has already been [approved by the Committee on Health, Hospitals and Human Services](#), Mr. Fonseca noted that almost 15 percent of the population of the Virgin Islands suffers with diabetes, with an additional 9,000 residents considered to be in a pre-diabetic stage. He emphasized the severe health impact of diabetes in a population, leading to increased incidence of eye problems, foot complications sometimes requiring amputation, kidney

disease, nerve damage, and increased risk of heart attack and stroke.

The proposed registry, which would require an initial investment of \$250,000 to establish, would collect data on the prevalence, risk factors, and outcomes of chronic kidney disease and diabetes in the USVI. The data could then be used by public health officials to better understand and address the troubling issue.



Shanisa Emmanuel, OMB Acting Associate Director (Credit: V.I. LEGISLATURE)

Shanisa Emmanuel, acting associate director at the Office of Management and Budget, expressed OMB's support for the registry's goals, but also voiced concerns about allocating general funds without a clear budgetary plan, given the government's current financial constraints.

"I urge the Legislature to explore alternate funding sources such as federal grants, or public-private partnerships to support the ongoing operations of the registry," she said, delivering testimony on behalf of OMB Director Jenifer O'Neal. If funds must come out of the general fund, the Legislature was asked to ensure that the appropriation made expires at the end of December, rather than remaining in effect until all monies are expended.

However, Senator Frett-Gregory made sure to apprise the young OMB staffer that her director's suggestion was not feasible. "The legislature does not enter into public-private partnerships. That's a responsibility of the government of the Virgin Islands executive branch. And we do not seek out federal funds. So as this measure moves, the expectation is that the executive branch will come up with innovative ways to fund the registry, which is very important to our community."

Lawmakers unanimously agreed that this initiative was a much-needed one for the territory, and rebuffed OMB's suggestion that funding for the initiative would be difficult. "What is the cost of life," asked Senator Novelle Francis. "We spend money for all kinds of things," he argued, noting that he wanted to amend the legislation to include data collection for strokes as well. "\$Two

hundred and fifty thousand dollars is peanuts in the grand scheme of things, in regards to what we're seeing here."

Senator Franklin Johnson, a non-committee member, agreed. "We spent \$1.5 million for Festival, we're going to spend \$1.5 million for Carnival. We're going to spend \$1 million for celebration – and I don't have a problem with that. But don't tell me we're not going to find \$200,000 for our health. It's unacceptable," he opined.

However, in acknowledgement of some of OMB's concerns, Ms. Frett-Gregory suggested that some amendments could be made to the proposed legislation to alleviate qualms over funding. "I do agree with her that there must be some budget plan," the senator said regarding Ms. Emmanuel's suggestion to expire the appropriation at the end of the year. "One of the things that we could do to show that we are responsible legislators is to make some amendments," the senator said, suggesting that \$50,000 be appropriated annually over the lifetime of the project. "We recognize the challenges with making these funds available until expended and what is occurring as a result of that," the lawmaker said. "That is one of the things that's creating our structural deficit."

Ms. Emmanuel conveyed the OMB's agreement with that plan of action. Before the vote, Mr. Fonseca announced his intention to adjust the draft bill to include a request for an annual appropriation of \$75,000 when it comes before the Committee on Rules and Judiciary. Lawmakers accepted Mr. Francis's amendment to include tracking of strokes in the registry, and the bill was unanimously approved by those committee members in attendance.