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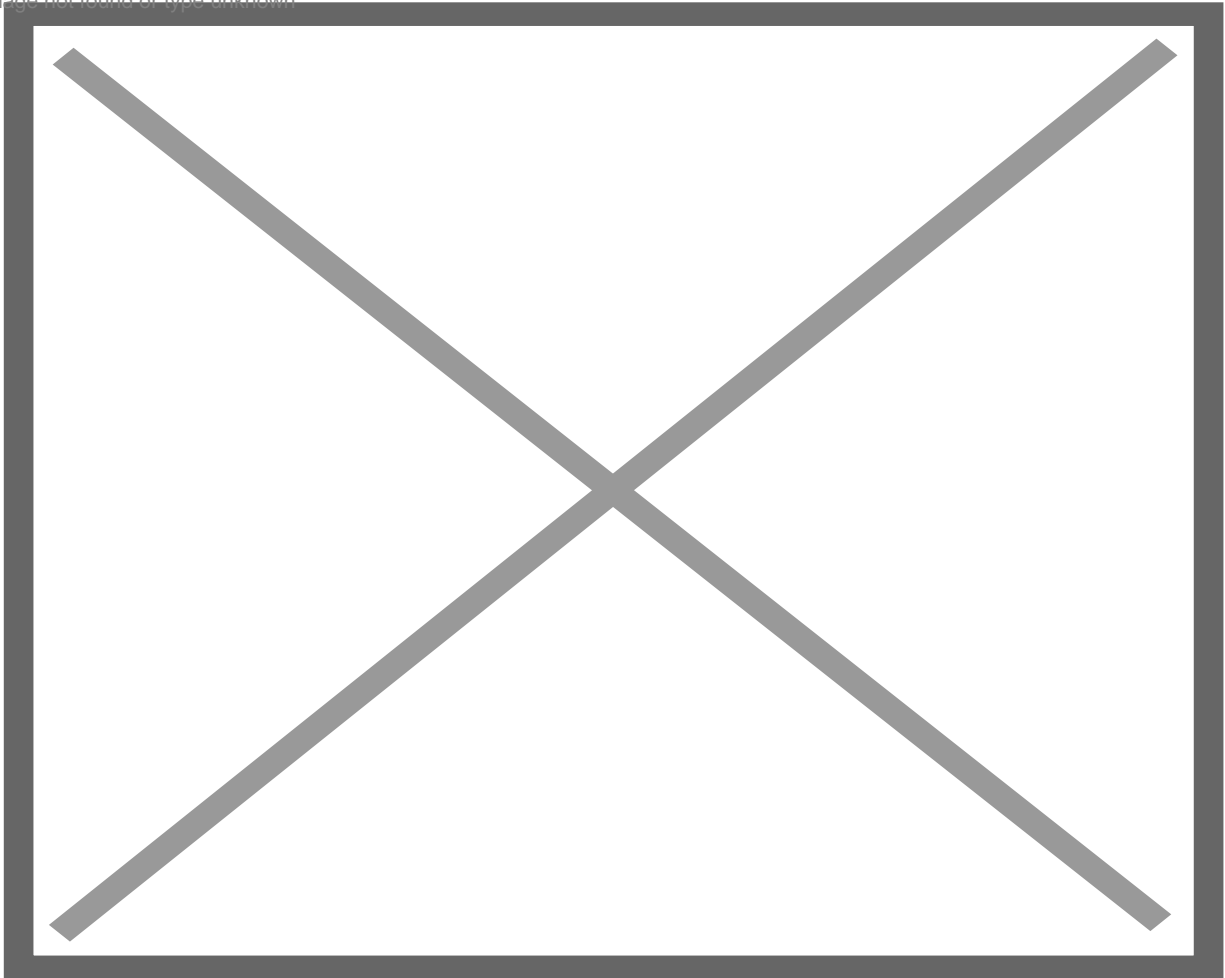
Harold Willocks, Averil George and Antonio Stevens Receive Approving Nods From Lawmakers

Senate approves Supreme Court, DHS, and Fire Service leaders

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From left to right, Judge Harold Willocks, Averil George, and Antonio Stevens. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

Lawmakers in the Committee of Rules and Judiciary have voted in favor of three nominations sent down by Governor Albert Bryan Jr for key positions in the territory: Harold Willocks as a justice of the Supreme Court, Averil George as commissioner of the V.I. Department of Human Services, and Antonio Stevens as director of Fire and Emergency Services.

In his brief testimony, Judge Willocks spoke of his over 30-year tenure in public service, which includes his 1992 appointment as the territory's Chief Public Defender. In 2009, he was tapped for

his first 6-year term as a judge at the V.I. Superior Court, a position he held for three terms. At the time of his Supreme Court nomination, Judge Willocks was serving as the Superior Court's administrative judge.

Following his remarks, Senator Marise James, a lawyer herself, pointedly asked Willocks whether he actually wanted to be a Supreme Court judge or whether "this is something that just fell in your lap." Willocks, who admitted that he prefers not to spotlight his accomplishments, responded by stating, "I can help the people of the Virgin Islands far more sitting [on] a Supreme Court bench than I could as a trial judge."

His nomination received favorable votes from all committee members present during Wednesday's meeting.

Also considered was the nomination of Ms. George for DHS, who was first announced as the nominee [last October](#). She has extensive experience in both the private and public sectors, including the Department of Public Works. In her testimony, Ms. George assured committee members that "the timing is right for me to be placed in this position." Having served in the role for just under six months, the commissioner nominee apprised legislators of a series of long and short-term goals for Human Services, including the hiring of additional staff, updating standard operating procedures, collaborating with the University of the Virgin Islands to recruit eligible social workers, and digitalizing fiscal operations.

Priorities spearheaded by Ms. George include the prudent replacement of three facilities including the Queen Louise Home for the Aged, Knud Hansen Complex Building, and Herbert Grigg Home for the Aged. Temporary repairs on the Queen Louise Home are estimated to be completed in January 2025.

Ms. George received commendations from senators who commented that the job was a "heavy lift." For his part, Senator Franklin Johnson told her, "I'm here to work with you in whichever way I can to support you in whichever way I can to make sure that your job is easier."

Senator Ray Fonseca, who chairs the Committee on Health, Hospitals, and Human Services, described Ms. George as "a breath of fresh air." Senator Dwayne DeGraff pledged his support for Ms. George as she continued what he characterized as a "Herculean task." Throughout, Ms. George seemed to maintain a deep sense of responsibility for the role. "I do not take this job lightly," she remarked. "I know it's a lot to do," she told senators shortly before her unanimous endorsement from the committee.

Up next for consideration was Mr. Stevens, nominated by the governor for the post of director of V.I. Fire and Emergency Medical Services. Mr. Stevens has acted in that role since the [sudden passing of VIFEMS founding director](#) Daryl George in October 2023.

In his testimony, Mr. Stevens explained that serving as assistant director of Fire until Mr. George's untimely passing allowed him to gain "familiarity with key management, managerial functions and processes such as budgeting, and human resources." Among his many goals, Mr. Stevens intends to hire 6 paramedics and 10 new firefighter EMTs per district, despite a "national shortage of paramedics." Improved customer service, increased utilization of technology and improved employee morale are also key objectives for the nominee.

A shortage of personnel, particularly paramedics, remains a major challenge with too few currently on staff. Efforts to raise the annual salary from \$52,000 to \$60,000 have thus far been unsuccessful, but Mr. Stevens said that VIFEMS is considering offering as much as \$75,000

to bolster staff numbers. Senators threw their support behind Mr. Stevens' tenure, with non-committee members promising positive votes on his nomination when it comes before the full body.

In other action, a host of bills were also successfully voted out of the Committee on Rules and Judiciary. Among them: [Bill 35-0115](#) relating to employment for the formerly incarcerated, and [Bill 35-0196](#) that would allow members of the Government Employees Retirement System to take loans off of their contributions. Bill sponsor Senator Milton Potter also introduced an amendment that would cap the interest rate GERS collects on each loan at 12 percent. [Bill 35-0207](#) to establish a diabetes, kidney disease and stroke registry also received the Committee's support, as did [Bill 35-0226](#), which bumps default minimum child support payments from \$250 to \$1000.

The committee also approved [Bill 35-0107](#), which seeks to posthumously honor Fenella Cooper, as was Bill 35-0184, an Act posthumously honoring Viggo E. Sewer. Senators also supported Bill 35-0208 which seeks to honor Bernice Alma Turnbull, a career public servant. Senator Joseph's [Bill 35-0223](#) honoring Bishop Dr. William A. Industrious will also move to the full body for further consideration. [Leases](#) for Pro Mar Services Inc. and the V.I. Housing and Finance Authority were also successful in the Committee of Rules and Judiciary.