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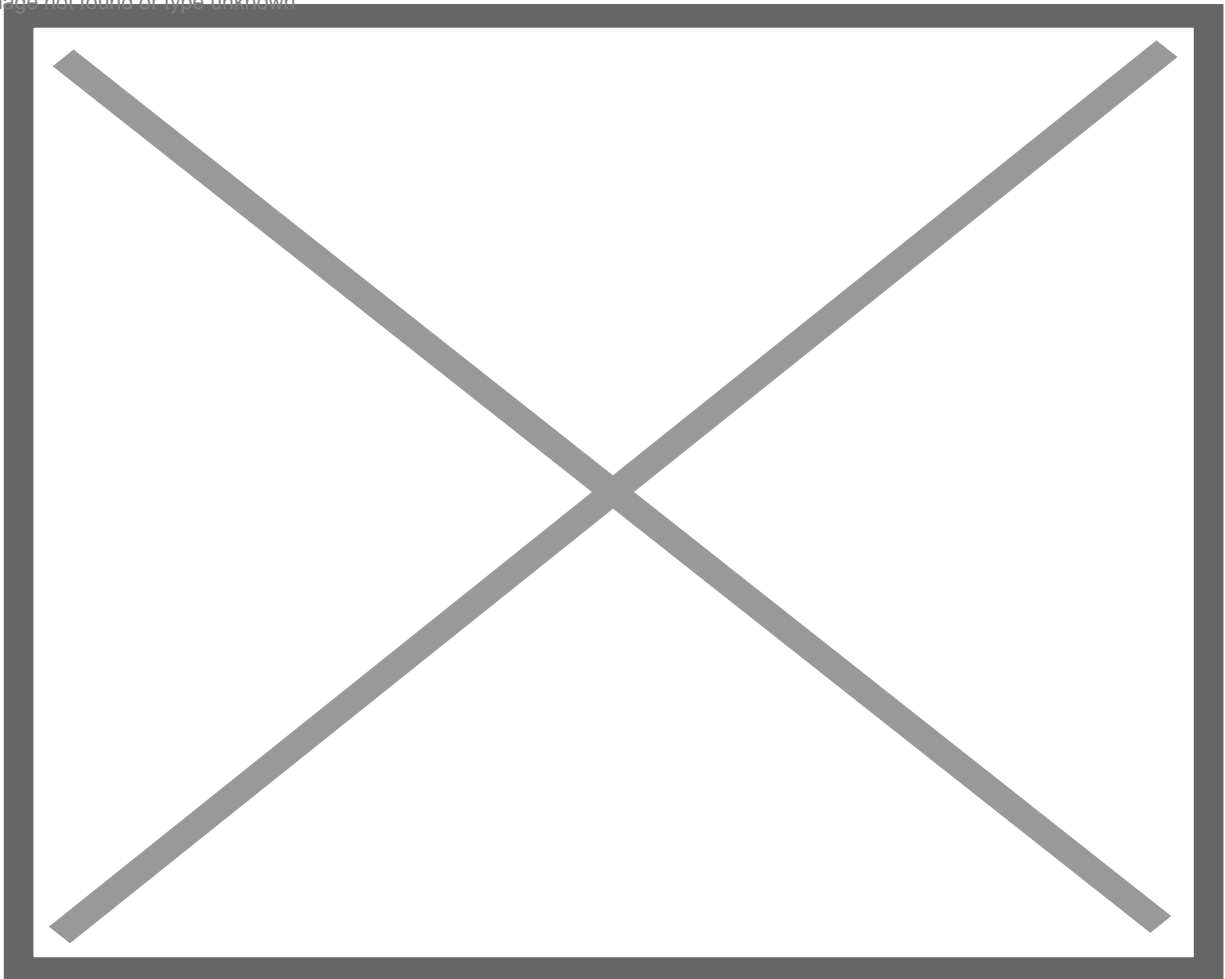
Carrion Proposes Digital Overhaul of Government Services with New Legislation

Bill 35-026 aims to integrate and modernize government websites, reducing reliance on costly external contractors

Technology / **Published On May 21, 2024 07:25 AM /**

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Senator Samuel Carrion hopes that his newest piece of legislation will fast-track the digitization of government services, making them more accessible and responsive to citizen needs.

Introduced on Monday in the Senate Committee on Government Operations, Veterans Affairs and Consumer Protection, Bill 35-026 is an act which would amend Title 3 of the Virgin Islands Code by adding a new chapter - 33A - to enact the 21st Century Integrated Digital Experience Act - IDEA. Mr. Carrion lamented that government agencies are separately contracting out the design of their websites at a “tremendous cost” to the government. Explaining the rationale behind the conceptualization of the legislation, the senator explained that government websites are “not

properly connected, and sometimes not compatible to each other.”

This, he said, negatively impacts the ease of doing business. Expanding on his desire to remove the responsibility of website design from outside contractors, Mr. Carrion reminded listeners that contractors have, on occasion, “[held] government websites hostage due to personal disputes.” He called for unfettered access and uniform platforms across all government agencies. Existing information technology personnel within the GVI could be rallied for those services and further trained to properly execute IDEA, he argued. He expressed the belief that the bill is “an essential step forward” for the government in its quest to modernize processes.

The bill would make the Bureau of Information Technology responsible for the creation of standards that will guide the digital consolidation of government agencies and provide overall direction to agency heads for website compatibility. BIT’s director Rupert Ross, however, quickly clarified that several issues required immediate action. Chief among them, noted Mr. Ross, was advocating for “adequate resource allocation to support the bill’s implementation.” Modernization needs, recruiting and training new personnel and support services are all expected to come at a cost. Mr. Ross also sounded a clarion call for the institution of a governance mechanism. He warned that if those actions are not taken, they will “likely pose challenges during implementation.”

In the original draft legislation, BIT was provided a timeframe of between 180 days and one year to implement Senator Carrion’s IDEA. However, the legislator has promised to amend the deadline based on the “complexity and scope” of the project. BIT has asked for more time to “conduct comprehensive assessments and engage stakeholders” for a smooth transition.

Testifying in favor of Bill 35-0236, viNGN’s chief executive officer Stephan Adams attempted to allay funding concerns. “Fortunately, there is funding. One of them particularly from NTIA is called BEAD.” He referred to the Broadband Equity Access and Deployment Program, federally funded to the tune of \$27 million and managed by the Office of Management and Budget. Mr. Adams believes that the funds could be used to “enact all the requirements” of the bill.

The BEAD funds have been earmarked for “workforce development,” Mr. Adams noted. He proposed that the “technical abilities to create a web portal and all the equipment necessary to upgrade government to modern standards” could be considered under the umbrella of workforce development. Mr. Ross, while not certain if the BEAD funds could indeed be used for IDEA’s implementation, promised to look into it ahead of the upcoming budget season.

Mr. Adams also encouraged the bill’s drafters to make an amendment that would allow the GVI to “operate a portal to all government agencies.” “A centralized GVI website would enable Virgin Islanders to easily navigate between all agencies in a single online visit,” he explained. He believed that it would reduce possible “unintended consequences” associated with each agency having to recode their websites.

Legislators were pleased to learn that the bill would require all government websites to cater to persons with disabilities and become ADA-compliant. While some platforms are currently accessible, many need to be updated. GVI’s ADA Coordinator Julien Henley took the opportunity to remind lawmakers that the Americans with Disabilities Act requires local governments to “give people with disabilities an equal opportunity to benefit from all programs, services and activities.” Access must be complemented by “effective communication comparable to those without disabilities.”

Senator Carrion's IDEA was duly supported by his colleagues. Senator Milton Potter described the bill as "forward thinking". Committee chair Senator Carla Joseph, meanwhile, said that she signed on to the bill "because I understand technology and how it can reshape our government and make it more efficient and productive."

All committee members present at the hearing supported Bill 35-0236 — six yeas, one absent — and it will be forwarded to the Committee on Rules & Judiciary for further vetting and amendments.

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