

VI-PR Friendship Committee Lacks Virgin Islander Representation, Faces Volunteer Shortages

As festivities continue, concerns over volunteer involvement and the lack of local representation within the committee spark debate during the Senate hearing

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Virgin Islanders and Puerto Ricans living in the territory are enjoying a long weekend of celebrations commemorating the 60th anniversary of the formalization of friendship between the two nations. However, amid the festivities, one former president of the VI-PR Friendship Committee has reminded the USVI's lawmaking arm that "friendship is a daily activity."

That was the sentiment shared by Vera Falu, who has called St. Croix home for over forty-five years, having moved to the territory to work in the healthcare sector as a dietician. She appeared before the Committee on Culture, Youth, Aging, Sports, and Parks on Friday, for an update on

plans for VI-PR Friendship Day. There, she appealed for more consistent inclusion of the Puerto Rican community in everyday decision-making.

“Don't remember us in October for VI-Puerto Rico Friendship [Day]. Remember us when you're passing legislation, when you're speaking about curriculum in your schools, when you're speaking about health for our seniors,” she declared. Ms. Falu is one of thousands of Puerto Ricans living, working, and accessing public services in the Virgin Islands, with St. Croix representing a plurality of the PR diaspora in the USVI. It's why she also called for the consideration of Spanish speakers when drafting forms and other documents. “The government offices don't have anybody in the offices to translate for them,” she lamented.

“We live here. We are part of the fabric of the Virgin Islands,” said Ms. Falu.

Ms. Falu told the Committee that she also harbors concerns about the survival of the VI-PR Friendship Committee. “I am concerned about the composition of the committee... You need to include Virgin Islanders in the committee. The legislation says you need to include them all the time because we are guests in this land,” she contended. Luis Torres, president of the VI-PR Friendship Committee was unable to tell Senator Franklin Johnson just how many native Virgin Islanders were active on the committee.

Friday's robust discussion, as described by committee chair Senator Angel Bolques Jr., also drew attention to the difficulty in attracting new volunteers to support the work of the VI-PR Committee. “It's so hard to get people to get involved in the committee,” shared Joseph Olmeda, who has served as president three times. “We're open to anybody to come and assist,” said Mr. Torres. “I am not turning anybody away.”

Nonetheless, the Committee is pressing on and has already begun celebrations intended to continue throughout the long weekend. For its long-term sustainability, however, Mr. Torres says they'll require more financial support from the Legislature. Ms. Falu, too, urged senators “to make sure that the appropriations are sufficient.” “Every four years, you remember to speak in Spanish,” she reminded, alluding to gubernatorial elections.

Senator Samuel Carrion, of Puerto Rican descent himself, wondered “what can we do to expand, enhance and make the committee better?” He suggested that the Committee be granted “a little bit more independence and autonomy,” perhaps by instituting a board. Ms. Falu vehemently disagreed. “The committee should remain independent,” she countered.

Instead, she suggested a return to a more grass-roots approach. “The committee needs to endeavor to touch bases with the community,” she advised. “Teachers need to be an integral part of the committee because teachers are going to carry the message forward to the children.” She also encouraged the Legislature to share the law establishing VI-PR Friendship Day with the president of the Legislature in Puerto Rico. “I have found really, truly, that in Puerto Rico, they don't know that we celebrate this long weekend here with such exuberance,” shared Ms. Falu.

That request has been shared with Senate President Novelle Francis.

“It's been six decades of this relationship, and hopefully six more, and on top of that, even more,” noted Sen. Bolques, joining his colleagues in wishing the Friendship Committee well.