

## Prescription Drug Monitoring Bill Moves Forward Despite Funding Source Concerns

**With an estimated \$1.5 million first-year cost, lawmakers express concerns over missed federal grants and the long-term funding for the vital program**

Health / **Published On November 25, 2024 07:04 AM /**

Nelcia Charlemagne **November 25, 2024**

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In due time, medical patients in the Virgin Islands will benefit from a Prescription Drug Monitoring Program (PDMP), as lawmakers greenlit legislation proposing the program's implementation.

On Friday, the Committee on Health, Hospitals and Human Services met to consider Bill 35-0295, which would require the Department of Health to establish and administer a program "to provide prescription drug monitoring."

The bill was sponsored by outgoing Senator Donna Frett-Gregory, who said she has worked on developing the proposed legislation collaboratively with the AARP of the Virgin Islands for two years. The Prescription Drug Monitoring Program is expected to be an electronic database that “tracks controlled substance prescriptions.” Per Frett-Gregory, the program “can also help to identify patients who may be at risk for overdose, and provide potentially life-saving information and interventions.”

Additionally, the senator anticipates that the program will be useful when patient medical history is unavailable, or when a patient transfers to another doctor. Currently, all fifty states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Northern Mariana Islands have operational PDMPs. “Bill 35-0295 is not novel, but it is impactful and it will be offering a layer of added protection,” Frett-Gregory said.

Troy de Chabert Schuster, state director for AARP, testified in support of the legislation. “The prevalence of prescription drug abuse continues to rise nationwide,” noted Mr. Schuster. He told lawmakers that “prescription drug misuse, particularly involving opioids, is a growing public health crisis,” with approximately 16 million Americans abusing prescription drugs in 2023, according to the National Center for Drug Abuse Statistics.

“Without intervention like a PDMP, practices such as doctor shopping, using multiple pharmacies and borrowing – even stealing – medications will continue to harm individuals,” Mr. Schuster warned.

He emphasized the importance of adequate funding for the program, encouraging lawmakers to include the initiative in the FY2026 budget. “The Department of Health must receive sufficient funding to implement and sustain the program, including infrastructure, staffing and training,” the director advised. Further, he stressed the need for a “clear implementation timeline,” suggesting the PDMP “be operational within 18 months of the act’s enactment to ensure prompt action and accountability.” A “comprehensive plan to educate the public” must also be included.

Estimates for the first year of the program’s implementation are as high as \$1.5 million in the first year, and \$450,000 annually for subsequent years.

The Department of Health, too, acknowledged the importance of the program’s implementation. Assistant Commissioner Reuben Molloy said that by establishing a PDMP, VIDOH would join a “nationwide effort to use data-driven approaches in combating prescription drug abuse while ensuring appropriate access to medications for patients who need them.”

Where matters of funding were concerned, Deputy Health Commissioner Renan Steele informed senators that the VIDOH has received additional funding for its opioid program “that could help support this particular PDMP programming.” Senator Marvin Blyden, however, was disappointed to learn that the department was “unaware” of a federal grant under the Harold Rogers Prescription Drug Monitoring Program. The deadline to apply for funds under that program, unfortunately, has since passed. “Moving forward, we really need to pay attention to many of these grants that assist us in the territory,” bemoaned Mr. Blyden.

Committee chair Senator Ray Fonseca also expressed concerns over funding, wondering “whether or not the government is ready [to implement this.] He joined Blyden in signaling his disappointment in VIDOH for failing to apply for the grant that they were unaware existed.

Nonetheless, lawmakers ultimately supported Bill 35-0295, which was forwarded to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary for further consideration.

