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Senate Advances \$20M Plan to Rebuild Nursing Homes, Addressing Urgent Needs for Elder Care

Senator DeGraff's Bill 35-0108 allocates \$10 million each for St. Croix and St. Thomas to improve the Herbert Grigg and Lucinda A. Millin homes, addressing critical infrastructure needs with funds from the Epstein settlement

Senate / **Published On December 14, 2024 07:32 AM /**

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The the Lucinda A. Millin Home in St. Thomas, USVI.

The efforts of Senator Dwayne Degraff are expected to result in \$20 million in funding for the rehabilitation of nursing homes in both districts. The money, a portion of the funds from the Epstein settlement agreement, is expected to support “the design and construction of nursing homes on St. Croix and St. Thomas,” with each district receiving equal allotments of \$10 million.

DeGraff presented Bill 35-0108 before the Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance on Friday. He referenced the Herbert Grigg Home for the Aged and the Lucinda A. Millin Home, calling both facilities “atrocious.” He considered the \$20 million in improvement funding as “something good” arising from the Epstein settlement.

Following the payment of legal fees and other appropriations against the settlement funds, the Department of Finance reports that the balance stands at just over \$23.2 million. The \$20 million appropriation for the senior citizen homes will be deducted from that balance.

Friday’s discussion on the use of the funds revealed a misunderstanding of the bill’s intent by both the Department of Finance and Department of Human Services. They both believed that the \$20 million would be deducted from funds already set aside under Act 8920. The act in question appropriates settlement funds for various projects and initiatives to enhance community services, mental health resources, infrastructure, and economic development in the Virgin Islands.

This misinterpretation initially prompted the DOF to oppose the bill, with testifiers suggesting “ambiguity” that required a review to ensure alignment with “legislative intent and legal requirements governing the settlement funds.” Any confusion, however, was quickly cleared by committee chair Senator Donna Frett-Gregory. “This is a whole new bill for whole new money,” she informed department officials.

The Department of Human Services, too, harbored several reservations. Its commissioner, Averil George, told lawmakers that the bill’s “current language and approach require further refinement to achieve these goals.” While she appreciated the bill’s intent to support infrastructure upgrades, Ms. George urged that “any allocation of funds reflect a holistic approach to addressing the systematic needs of our elders.” Referencing additional beds, for instance, “oversimplifies the complexities of elder care,” the commissioner lamented.

“The challenges we face today are deeply rooted in a dual impact of infrastructure damage and systemic resource shortages,” she told the committee. She complained of workforce deficits, reminding lawmakers that “even if physical spaces were restored to their original capacity, the ability to provide high-quality care hinges on adequate staffing.”

“The bill proposes funding allocations without sufficient detail regarding how these funds will be used to address the systemic issues of elder care, particularly in staffing and operation,” Ms. George asserted. She informed lawmakers that plans have already been actioned to rehabilitate both homes and negotiations are ongoing to purchase the Sea View Nursing Home, a facility that was shuttered in 2020.

“We have an additional \$20 million that I’m hoping that we could build on to what has already been created by the administration,” noted Senator Novelle Francis Jr. He wondered whether the DHS had recommendations on how the funds could best be used to suit the department’s needs. A decision on whether the funds would be used for infrastructure or staffing will follow additional discussion with “all parties involved,” Ms. George advised.

Senator Ray Fonseca also agreed that “we need to look at the whole package.” So did Senator Marvin Blyden, who encouraged “more collaboration and communication.” Nonetheless, he acknowledged the importance of the bill for senior citizens.

Responding to DHS, the bill’s sponsor Senator DeGraff said, “I’m giving you \$10 million you do what you want with it. That’s how I look at it... We have this money here that is in a treasury waiting to be spent, and we’re just trying to allocate it toward getting something done.” With pledges to continue the discussions, Bill 35-0108 was passed without amendment and will be

considered once more during the December 18th Legislative session.

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