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Feasibility of UVI Medical School in USVI Debated in Senate Amid Funding Concerns

While UVI pushes for a medical school, Senator Potter suggested a School of Allied Health as a more feasible option. UVI President Safiya George defended the school's impact on healthcare but acknowledged that financial barriers remain a major challenge.

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The Medical School Simulation Center on St. Croix received a \$14.1 million grant from the Economic Development Administration of the U.S. Department of Commerce. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

The University of the Virgin Islands remains committed to establishing a medical school, despite [lacking the financial resources](#) required to secure accreditation and demonstrate long-term

viability to regulatory agencies.

The update was shared by UVI president Dr. Safiya George as she testified before the Committee on Rules and Judiciary on Thursday in support of her nomination to serve on the Government Hospital and Health Facilities Corporation, District Governing Board of St. Thomas-St. John.

She responded to a question from the chair of the Senate Committee on Health, Hospitals, and Human Services Ray Fonseca, who wanted to discuss “the endowments so that we can get the medical school fully certified.”

UVI has [not yet attained accreditation](#) from the Liaison Committee on Medical Education (LCME). However, George indicated that the university has not allowed this to hinder efforts to move forward. UVI, she explained, is “having conversations with several other LCME accredited medical schools on the mainland to explore the opportunities for partnership, to at least start our medical school in partnership for a number of years. George anticipates using that period to “build capacity and build our foundation reserves.”

UVI continues to stress the importance of a medical school to “[produce] medical doctors to enter the workforce” and “attract other health care providers to the territory.” However, for UVI to accomplish such a feat, it will require a much heftier endowment than what it currently possesses. “Most universities, when they apply to become an LCME-accredited medical school, their endowments range from \$50 million, \$75 million to upwards of \$100 million. Ours is nowhere near there,” George explained.

“We've applied twice so far, and some of the feedback was we didn't have enough financial sustainability,” the school’s president shared. “One of the main factors preventing us from getting an LCME-accredited medical school on our own is that our foundation reserves are not high enough.”

“We'll need at least \$20 million, minimum, to be able to function solidly on a financial footing,” George told Senator Fonseca. That figure, she says, will allow UVI to offer high quality programming to students and “hire and retain the best faculty.” The operational cost of running the medical school could then be anywhere from \$3 million to \$5 million annually. UVI’s motivation to continue along this mission despite inadequate funding is an end goal of producing “the best doctors in the region, in the country and the world,” George stated.

“We got to find a way to get you that \$20 million minimum, quick,” noted Senator Fonseca. Specific plans, however, were not offered during Thursday’s meeting.

Senate President Milton Potter suggested that perhaps UVI should instead consider a scaled-back approach. “We've been at this thing for, it feels like more than a decade,” he observed. Potter explained that he was “trying to figure out if we'll be able to have a sustained medical school or we're setting ourselves up for challenges down the line.” Rather than a full-fledged medical school, the lawmaker suggested that UVI perhaps consider “the direction of developing a School of Allied Health.” This, Senator Potter believes, is “much more achievable, and the demand here is great.”

“We can be the school in the region that produces top notch allied health professions, medical technologists and the like,” he told Dr. George. He requested George’s opinion, aware that “we went all in with this medical school, and there might be some reluctance to back off.”

As Senator Potter perhaps anticipated, George was not exceedingly fond of his idea. “That might be a more achievable path,” she conceded, “but I don't think going for the easier path is the route to go if we want to save lives,” she rebutted. While George agreed that there is an increasing need for allied health professionals like speech language pathologists and radiologists, she maintained that “if you want to change the health care system in a country” there must be special focus on “what we do in medicine.”

“I'm a nurse advocating for a medical school because I recognize the importance of it, and I recognize the importance of why my training was so rich, because I also trained with physicians,” she reminded Mr. Potter, stressing the importance of having various levels of medical students learning alongside each other.

Despite funding shortfalls and UVI's current inability to achieve accreditation, George maintains that establishing a medical school is “how UVI can play a role in helping to reshape the healthcare system.”

UVI announced its plan to develop a medical school in the territory in May 2014, [following board approval](#).