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Taxi License Testing to Restart in March After Taxicab Commission Fixes Vetting Process

After suspending testing due to failures in the vetting process, UVI CELL is preparing to restart taxi license exams. Lawmakers criticized the Taxi Cab Commission for improperly issuing licenses and discussed placing it under DLCA oversight.

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Taxis in Christiansted, St. Croix. By. THE VIRGIN ISLANDS PORT AUTHORITY

The University of the Virgin Islands Center for Excellence in Leadership and Learning (UVI CELL) is preparing to resume testing for the issuance of taxi licenses after shortfalls in the vetting process by the Taxi Cab Commission forced the testing program's suspension.

On Friday, UVI CELL's director Dr. Suzanne Darrow-Magras appeared before the Senate Committee on Workforce Development to discuss ongoing workforce development initiatives in the territory. The conversation turned to the issue of taxi examinations after a question on its status was posed by Senator Hubert Frederick.

"The problem was that there were inherent challenges with individuals not taking the test and were still receiving licenses," explained Ms. Darrow-Magras. "The decision was made to put a pause on all testing and programming and giving out of licenses until we could shore up the program and processes with the Taxi Cab Commission." The TCC is responsible for vetting all applicants before they are allowed to take the eight-week class and sit the licensure exam at UVI CELL.

During the vetting process, applicants are required to supply the TCC with documentation including medical reports, government-issued identification, a traffic report, and a police report. Applicants are required to be between 21 and 65 years old and must be able to speak and write in English.

"The Taxi Cab Commission, I believe, has resolved all of those issues, and everyone who is driving should be fully licensed," reported Ms. Darrow-Magras. Nonetheless, Sen. Kurt Vialet, committee chair, considered it another issue to add to the growing list of challenges impacting the TCC. "We see some of the work that we need to do in terms of what was going on with the Taxi Cab Commission, which is an illegal issuance of licenses," he noted.

Lawmakers continue to consider legislation that would place the TCC under the oversight of the Department of Licensing and Consumer Affairs.

Displeased with the failure of the TCC to properly vet applicants, Senator Franklin Johnson provided some anecdotal information. "I've heard a lot of folks, especially on the small island St. Thomas, talk about folks that could barely speak English but had a taxi license." Though the organization was not present at Friday's discussion, Mr. Johnson called on the TCC to "investigate thoroughly." "It's not helping us when it comes to the tourist industry at all, it's only going to hurt us," he lamented.

Aware of challenges with English language proficiency, UVI CELL has "added in a testing component where an individual can be screened for English proficiency," shared Dr. Darrow-Magras. The test is at a cost to the applicant and is critical to ensure that taxi drivers who provide tours of the islands are able to adequately communicate with their passengers. "You have to be able to present on Virgin Islands landmarks and to speak to the tourists," said Dr. Darrow-Magras. It's why UVI CELL also includes history classes in the taxi licensure program.

Senator Marvin Blyden has encouraged UVI CELL to extend the history classes to all tour guides, including those who do not operate taxis. In fact, it is a requirement that the lawmaker thinks should be made legally binding. "In the Code, there is no recommendation for tour guides to take the test, and that's a loophole that we must close," Senator Blyden remarked.

Classes for taxi cab licensure are set to begin in March.