

## Diabetes Center Seeks \$1.5 Million in Annual Government Support to Sustain and Expand Services

**VIDCOE is seeking \$1.5 million in annual government funding to sustain operations and expand services, citing high underinsurance rates and rising demand. Lawmakers expressed interest but raised questions about long-term sustainability and budgeting.**

Health / **Published On April 22, 2025 10:42 AM /**

Nelcia Charlemagne **April 22, 2025**

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The Virgin Islands Diabetes Center of Excellence (VIDCOE) is requesting an annual allocation of \$1.5 million from the Legislature to support current operations and expand critical services. Executive Director Julia Sheen made the request during a recent meeting of the Committee on Budget, Appropriations and Finance, where lawmakers appeared receptive but stopped short of making any firm commitments.

Established in 2020, VIDCOE is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit that has traditionally relied on grants and donations to fund operations. The center received \$100,000 in legislative support over the last two fiscal years and began billing patients one year ago. While prepared to pursue additional grant funding, Dr. Sheen argued that a direct government appropriation would allow the Center to grow its reach, particularly in the St. Thomas/St. John district.

“Fifty percent of these funds will be allocated for direct patient care, forty-three percent will cover preventive programs, and seven percent will support administrative and operational costs,” Dr. Sheen explained. During the April 15 hearing, she told senators that “ongoing support is critical,” especially since 63% of VIDCOE’s patients are underinsured. She emphasized the center’s value, stating that a year of diabetic care services at VIDCOE costs \$10,000 to \$15,000, compared to \$80,000 to \$100,000 at other facilities. “VIDCOE is a worthy investment,” she said. “VIDCOE is already demonstrating a return on investment.”

With additional funding, VIDCOE hopes to serve more diabetic patients across all age groups. The center currently assists thousands of Virgin Islanders, including seniors and low-income families. “Without this continued support, we risk losing momentum on the tremendous progress made in prevention, treatment and education,” Dr. Sheen stated. Without it, access to care will be “significantly compromised.”

The proposed funding would cover salaries and benefits for six full-time employees. “We’ve also included things like benefits that none of us have: health insurance, retirement plan,” she added.

Support for VIDCOE came from several committee members. “Saving lives is the most important mission of this Legislature,” said Senator Ray Fonseca, chair of the Committee on Health, Hospitals, and Human Services. He and Budget Committee Chair Senator Novelle Francis agreed that investing in VIDCOE would reduce uncompensated care at local hospitals. “It will reduce the emergency room wait time. It will reduce the numbers and it will save lives,” said Mr. Fonseca.

Senator Marvin Blyden also expressed support, acknowledging budget constraints but expecting continued advocacy from Senator Fonseca, given his role in healthcare oversight.

While no draft legislation accompanied the funding request, Dr. Sheen’s testimony comes just weeks before FY2026 budget hearings begin. “When you come, get with a senator to create a bill so we could give you the money,” advised Senator Dwayne DeGraff.

Initially, some lawmakers believed the request was for one-time funding. “When that \$1.5 million ends, what happens to your employees? What happens to your organization?” DeGraff asked. Dr. Sheen responded that VIDCOE has a “sustainability plan” and is “very aggressive in writing grants and billing for our services.” DeGraff requested a copy of the plan “so we could know that if we are going into this venture, that you’re going to be able to stand on your own two feet.”

Senator Kurt Vialet pressed for more details on how the \$1.5 million would be spent. Dr. Sheen explained that the Center’s annual operating budget is \$1,587,287.71, funded through four separate grants, including a \$1.9 million ARPA grant. Patient billing brought in only \$70,000 last year, far short of her \$350,000 receivables goal.

“Once you put something in place, you’ve got to keep in mind that that is what you’re going to have to fund on a regular basis,” said Mr. Vialet. “That is a \$1.5 million appropriation that you’re expecting every fiscal year?” he asked.

“That is what I’m requesting. Yes, Senator,” Dr. Sheen confirmed.

As the Legislature prepares for the upcoming budget cycle, lawmakers on the Committee on Budget, Finance and Appropriation must now determine whether they can commit to a fifteenfold increase over the Center's current \$100,000 allocation in the FY2025 budget's miscellaneous section. The request comes at a time of reduced federal spending and lagging revenue collections in the territory.

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