

USVI Faces Special Education Staffing Crisis Amid Evaluation Backlogs, Red Tape and Rising Needs

VIDE and recruiters say dual licensure, red tape, and rising living costs are deterring candidates, putting the territory at a disadvantage as states ramp up hiring of special education professionals.

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The Virgin Islands is facing challenges in filling crucial special education positions even as the number of known neurodivergent students increases. That was the testimony of both the V.I. Department of Education and a recruiter of special education professionals during a hearing dedicated to special education on Friday.

Members of the Senate Committee on Education and Workforce Development listened as Education Commissioner Dionne Wells-Hedrington outlined what she referred to as a “growing need for special education teachers and paraprofessionals” in both districts. Insufficient staffing

means VIDE has fallen behind in evaluating students who may need to access special education services, something that appears to have become a chronic issue for the department.

VIDE will soon have to comply with a 2007 consent decree, which aims to “address specific deficiencies in the Virgin Islands special education services.” Among its provisions are “ensuring or enhancing procedures for evaluating and determining eligibility for special education services.”

However, the failure to conduct timely evaluations is compounded by the already-established shortage of specialized teachers. According to Wells-Hedrington, the Claude O. Markoe Elementary School needs two special education teachers and four paraprofessionals, while the John H. Woodson Jr. High School needs one teacher and three paraprofessionals. VIDE is also grappling with rising costs where contracting therapists is concerned. “Because we don't have the personnel on hand, we have to contract the services,” the commissioner explained, telling senators that hourly rates have increased.

“Despite continuous recruitment efforts, securing qualified permanent staff has been challenging,” added Assistant Commissioner Victor Somme III. At the start of the school year, eight psychologist positions were vacant. The department recorded some success in March, however, hiring two bilingual school-certified psychologists through partnerships with two staffing agencies. Another partnership is also helping VIDE chip away at the backlog of evaluations. “This agency has successfully conducted psychological assessments and submitted reports for a limited number of students,” Mr. Somme explained.

For Commissioner Wells-Hedrington, “new, competitive stipends” are critical to the future of special education services. Additionally, she describes a “long-term goal” based on “creating a pipeline to get individuals interested in earning degrees that focus on those specialized services.” Indeed, a significant portion of Friday’s conversations were lamentations on the perceived lack of youth interest in pursuing education as a career.

“We're developing some crisis in the Virgin Islands,” stated committee chair Senator Kurt Vialet. “As long as you have a community that refuses to become professionals, you will continue to import, and you'll continue to have issues... A community cannot continue to exist when the population refuse to value education and wants to become educators...if everybody don't wake up, we're going to be in for some serious problems.”

Underscoring the need to develop local talent in that area, Wells-Hedrington observed that “in the past, we were able to recruit international teachers to fill those special education vacancies, but now we're competing with states that are also utilizing those individuals.”

Making the situation more challenging, the USVI seems to be further reducing its ability to attract qualified school psychologists thanks to extra licensure requirements. “We are going to always have an issue with recruiting school psychologists if we don't look at the deeper why,” insisted Andrea Shillingford, St. Croix’s deputy superintendent. “Our school psychologists have to get two licenses, and we have so much red tape with all of the things that we do.”

According to Mrs. Shillingford, this additional license is not necessary on the mainland unless the individual plans to go into private practice. “That's something for you senators to look into because that would help us be able to recruit more school psychologists,” she said. She blamed the Board of Psychology for the additional bureaucracy.

Senator Violet subsequently tasked VIDE to “draft something and give it to this body so we can put it under consideration.”

The challenge of dual licensure was also raised by Mardly Smith, owner and recruiter for Orange Tree Staffing (OTS). Per Ms. Smith, there are “38 OTS active contractors providing services for the Virgin Islands” in the current school year. That figure includes one school psychologist and one hybrid school psychologist. There is an additional opening for the school psychologist in St. Thomas.

According Ms. Smith, prior to 2020, “professionals could register through the state reciprocity using valid licensure from another US jurisdiction.” Now, however, the Board of Psychology mandates that all school psychologists must also be “nationally certified through the National Association of School Psychologists.” She added that “NASP itself clarifies that the NCSP is not intended to be a condition of employment, but rather a voluntary national credential that recognizes professional excellence.”

Ms. Smith asserts that there is “little incentive to obtain this optional credential, particularly when it involves extra time, cost and paperwork with no added benefit.” Instead, it places the territory at a “competitive disadvantage in a national job market.”

In her testimony, Ms. Smith outlined several other challenges to recruiting critical staff for special education, including “relocation and cost of living.” According to the recruiter, “housing, transportation, food, and utilities often deter qualified professionals from accepting or sustaining long-term positions.” Salary and “competitive pay” were another challenge. The shrinking number of university graduates with education qualifications also troubled Ms. Smith. “Shortage is especially felt in rural, remote or island communities, where the talent pool is limited and the barriers to entry are higher.”

Like Senator Violet and other concerned legislators, Ms. Smith’s recommendation was based on early intervention. “We’re in need of all these occupations. But it starts early in life, and it starts in the family home, encouraging these children to be in these professions.”