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Bill Mandating Firearms Training, Screening, and Certification for Private Security Personnel Swiftly Approved in Committee

Sen. Avery Lewis's bill mandates training administered by the VIPD, including physical and psychological screening. Applicants must submit fingerprints, pay \$200 in fees, and renew certification every five years to carry lethal weapons on duty.

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Senator Avery Lewis has successfully introduced legislation that mandates lethal weapons training for privately employed security guards and investigators. It's legislation that Mr. Lewis considers "critical for the safety and professionalism of private security in the United States Virgin Islands."

Bill 36-0136 outlines the role of the commissioner of the V.I. Police Department in the process, including administering the “minimum courses of study and training for the program in the handling of lethal weapons.” The commissioner is also required to administer “physical and psychological testing and screening” of applicants, “barring from the program those not physically or mentally fit to handle lethal weapons.”

Those who wish to take the training, meanwhile, must submit an application that includes their fingerprints and a \$150 postal money order application fee. Exceptions apply for full-time police officers. Individuals who successfully complete the lethal weapons training program must also pay a \$50 certification fee before receiving their completion certificate.

Valid for five years, the “appropriately sized” physical certificate must be carried upon the person of the applicant as identification while he or she is on duty. Per Bill 36-0136, privately employed agents must renew their certification 6 months before expiration. The bill does not specify whether the fees must exclusively be paid by the applicant or whether their private employer can foot the bill.

For Senator Lewis, “it is not about limiting opportunities for employment, nor is it about adding unnecessary bureaucracy. Rather, it is about protecting our communities.” He described the bill as a “win” for the territory, as private security staff carrying lethal weapons will gain the “knowledge, skills, and accountability to do so safely.” The St. Thomas/St. John lawmaker insists that Bill 36-0136 affirms the government’s prioritization of “safety, professionalism, and accountability.”

The proposed legislation received the support of the VIPD. Assistant Commissioner Sean Santos agreed that the private security sector, which largely operates in public spaces, “functions under inconsistent training and oversight.” He agreed that training will “reduce the risk to the public and to the security officers themselves and to the communities they serve.”

Training, including the application and certification fee, will cost each successful applicant \$200. However, Mr. Santos noted that “the cost of not requiring it is far higher in lives lost, in injuries sustained, and in the liability that comes when preventable tragedies occur.” Senator Dwayne DeGraff, for his part, suggested that the fee for certification “should be more than \$50.”

“The decision to codify lethal weapon training for security guards and investigators is a good one,” said Attorney General Gordon Rhea. The territory, he testified, has a “responsibility to ensure public safety and to regulate the use of force by establishing uniform rules and policies.”

Gleston McIntosh is the executive director of the Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST). He made the astute observation that private security officers are often the first responders at businesses, schools, government facilities and public events. He noted that they must make “critical split-second decisions at the cost of lives” but are not held to the same training standards as POST-certified peace officers. Bill 36-0136, therefore, “closes that gap.” Mr. McIntosh was pleased that the bill would require “training in de-escalation, decision-making under stress and constitutional protection.”

Bill 36-0136 was an easy ask, breezing through the Committee on Homeland Security, Justice, and Public Safety. It will now be placed on the agenda of an upcoming meeting of the Committee on Rules and Judiciary for further vetting.