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Virgin Islands Senators Advance Bill to Create Elder Abuse Registry and Multidisciplinary Team Despite Funding Concerns

Bill 36-0099, sponsored by Senator Angel Bolques Jr., would mandate DOJ escalation of elder abuse cases, establish a registry to track abusers, and form a multidisciplinary team. Lawmakers and advocates say it closes gaps, though DHS raised funding issues

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The Committee on Culture, Youth, Aging, Sports and Parks has vetted and supported legislation aiming to protect older persons from potential abuse.

Sponsored by Senator Angel Bolques Jr., Bill 36-0099 aims to improve the Virgin Islands' response to elder abuse by creating a multidisciplinary team (MDT) and an elder abuse registry.

According to the bill's sponsor, the legislation "responds to a troubling reality" with elder abuse becoming a "growing crisis."

The measure mandates that as soon as the Department of Human Services "confirms imminent danger," they must escalate the matter to the V.I. Department of Justice. Subsequently, Sen. Bolques says the DOJ must "promptly seek court-ordered protections." The bill also establishes an Elder Anti Abuse Multidisciplinary Team (MDT) composed of professionals from justice, health care and advocacy sectors. They'll be tasked with responding holistically to cases of elder abuse.

Additionally, it requires that the DOJ develop an elder abuse registry. The registry will offer a central system to track abusers, ensuring that individuals with "substantiated abuse histories" are not able to secure elder care roles easily.

Patricia Lynn Pryor, deputy attorney general at the DOJ, testified that the registry would "serve as an incredibly useful function." She concurred that individuals who have pled guilty to crimes involving mistreatment of the elderly "should not be employed by financial or governmental institutions that allow them unbridled access to this vulnerable part of our population."

She does not believe that the implementation of such a registry would attract "any astronomical fee." Perhaps one additional staff member may be necessary, Ms. Pryor estimated.

Taetia Phillips-Dorsett, assistant commissioner in the Department of Human Services, told lawmakers at Friday's meeting that DHS supports the "intent" of Bill 36-0099. She agreed that the bill's provisions are "essential to closing long-standing gaps in our adult protection infrastructure." The MDT will "improve accountability, strengthen case outcomes and ensure more consistent protections," added Ms. Phillips-Dorsett. Indeed, the DHS is committed to protecting older persons, with a dedicated Adult Protective Services Unit.

However, Ms. Phillips-Dorsett testified that Bill 36-0099 "does not earmark funding" to allow the DOJ to develop the aforementioned registry. She argued that the DOJ requires funding to "hire data support technician positions," fearing that without funding Bill 36-0099 would become "another unfunded task with little sustainability success."

Among Ms. Phillips-Dorsett's various recommendations to strengthen the bill was a request for "funding and staffing support." She suggested including "explicit language" to designate the DOJ as the entity "authorized to seek federal grants and local appropriations to support these mandates."

Senator Bolques, however, had already addressed the underfunding argument. In his opening remarks, he contended that "budget concerns cannot excuse inaction." He went as far as stating that "any claims that this bill represents an unfunded mandate is categorically false." Bolques referenced several federal funding sources that are "accessible to the Virgin Islands." He remarked that "even the Social Services Block Grant can be tapped to support coordinated efforts and services to prevent and respond to elder abuse."

But as Ms. Phillips-Dorsett explained, the Social Services Block Grant may not be an option. The Department of Human Services has received a funding cut of over \$1 million, and available funds are largely used for the Meals on Wheels program, itself [struggling with obtaining adequate funding](#). As for seeking other federal grants, she shared that DHS does not have a "separate federal grant office that includes a grant writer." The Department remains open to seeking funding opportunities, however as written, the law places the burden of obtaining those funds on the shoulders of already under-resourced agencies.

Sen. Bolques agreed that staffing levels could be improved. Senator Carla Joseph, who stood in as the meeting's chair, suggested that DHS put grant writing services "out for bid."

"That's why it's important that we fill those vacancies, to go after these federal funds and assure that programs like this legislation, once passed, is implemented and utilized," Senator Marvin Blyden agreed.

In the spirit of collaboration, Patricia Lynn Pryor of the DOJ offered to engage their grant writer to "investigate some of these grants that were mentioned today and seek out some of those for this purpose."

With financial concerns quelled – at least for now – the Committee on Culture Youth, Aging, Sports and Parks voted in favor of the bill. Sen. Bolques has accepted other recommendations from DHS's Ms. Phillips-Dorsett, including detailed definitions and amended language. They are expected to be included as amendments during a Committee on Rules and Judiciary session.

According to Troy deChabert-Schuster, State Director of AARP Virgin Islands, Bill 36-0099 "is not just another bill." Instead, it is a "test of our values, our resolve and our duty to protect the most vulnerable among us."