

## V.I. Dental Board Chair Calls for Local Training Program to Tackle Critical Shortage of Dental Hygienists

**Dr. Trevor Connor urged lawmakers to establish a dental hygiene program at UVI to address the territory's chronic shortage of dental professionals, saying local training would improve access, cut Medicaid costs, and keep young residents serving at home.**

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Nelcia Charlemagne **October 29, 2025**

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The Virgin Islands' chronic shortage of dental hygienists has reached a breaking point, prompting urgent calls for a local training program to strengthen the territory's oral healthcare workforce and expand access to preventive care.

Speaking before the Committee on Health, Hospitals, and Human Services on Tuesday, Dr. Trevor Connor, chair of the V.I. Dental Board, described the shortage as a “persistent” one plaguing both the territory and neighboring islands. To solve it, he proposed the creation of a dental hygiene training program that would “strengthen the territory’s dental workforce, enhance quality of care, and expand access to oral health services.”

Dr. Connor envisions a locally accessible education pipeline that would allow Virgin Islanders to train and stay home to serve their communities. “There is considerable interest from local young people desiring to pursue careers in dental hygiene,” he told lawmakers, “but they are held back by financial and logistical barriers associated with relocating for education.” A program established in the Virgin Islands, he said, would close that gap while delivering “broad community benefits.”

Among those benefits, Dr. Connor highlighted the importance of early intervention and prevention. “Early detection of oral health issues” can stop minor problems from developing into “more serious and ultimately more costly dental treatment,” he explained. Such preventative care, he added, would “reduce the cost burden to public programs such as Medicaid.” A local training program, he said, would also “encourage more of our young people to remain at home and serve their local communities.”

Dr. Connor identified the University of the Virgin Islands as the natural partner to lead this initiative. “There are several academic programs that we could tap into to allow the territory and UVI to become a center of excellence for fostering a new path for job creation,” he said. An associate-level dental hygiene program would take two years to complete, while a bachelor’s degree could be achieved in four.

Only two institutions in the Caribbean currently offer this type of training, Dr. Connor noted—giving UVI an opportunity to fill a regional void. He pointed to the university’s president, Dr. Safiya George, who has “shown interest in the concept of a program of this nature,” with further discussions expected soon.

“Should the Legislature consider this initiative as a priority, it would be transformational,” Dr. Connor urged.

Senator Novelle Francis responded positively, revealing that he already has a bill on file to enable such a program. “I’ve had a bill for quite some time now to allow that to happen,” he said, acknowledging that “there have been some challenges in us being able to get that going.” Still, he welcomed Dr. Connor’s conversations with UVI leadership and expressed hope for swift progress. “Hopefully, we could manifest that in the very near future,” Sen. Francis said, noting the “waiting list in the thousands” for dental hygienist services in the territory.

For now, the proposal remains just that—an ambitious vision to tackle a growing healthcare gap. Whether the Legislature and UVI can turn that vision into a functioning program will determine how soon Virgin Islanders gain access to much-needed preventive dental care.