

## Steven Payne Sentenced to 25 Years in Florida Sexual Battery Case That Began With V.I. Consortium Investigation

Former at-large Senator Steven Payne Sr., 59, was sentenced to 25 years in prison after a Florida jury convicted him of sexual battery of a minor, meaning he would be in his mid-80s if he serves the full term.

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Steven Payne Sr., left, was expelled from the 34th Legislature on Wednesday, July 20, 2022. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE.

JACKSONVILLE, Florida — Former at-large Senator Steven Payne Sr. was sentenced to 25 years in prison on Thursday after a Florida jury convicted him on one count of sexual battery of a minor following an October 2025 trial.

The sentence was imposed in the Fourth Judicial Circuit Court after jurors found Payne guilty of sexually assaulting Steffi Emilien when she was 17 years old. The conviction stemmed from conduct that occurred between August 1, 2018, and February 27, 2019, at his sister's home in Jacksonville, Florida.

The charge is a first-degree felony under Florida law and is punishable by up to life imprisonment.

### **The Conviction**

The six-member jury deliberated for approximately three hours before returning a guilty verdict at the conclusion of a three-day trial in October.

Prosecutors argued that Payne exploited a position of authority over Emilien, who had relocated from St. Lucia to St. John and performed in the youth band VI Avengerz, which Payne managed. They described him as a father figure who manipulated that trust before escalating the abuse after she moved to Florida following the 2017 hurricanes.

Assistant State Attorney Shaina Ruth told jurors that Payne used his authority to “test and control” his victim before carrying out the abuse.

In rebuttal, Assistant State Attorney Jaclyn Blair told jurors that credible testimony itself constitutes evidence under the law and pointed to what prosecutors described as a pattern of grooming and abuse.

The defense, led by Christopher Carson, argued that Emilien's claims were uncorroborated and stemmed from “feelings of rejection.” Carson urged jurors to separate emotion from evidence and cautioned that “an emotional decision is a poor decision.”

Judge Meredith Charbula instructed jurors that they must find proof of penetration by an object, that the victim was between 12 and 18, and that Payne occupied a familial or custodial role. She reminded them that reasonable doubt may arise from evidence, lack of evidence, or contradictions in testimony, but that sympathy or anger could not guide their decision.

The jury concluded that Payne sexually assaulted Emilien using a vibrator during the charged period.

### **Victim Testimony**

Following the October verdict, Emilien described the moment as long-awaited relief.

“I was very nervous, like my legs were shaking,” she said. “I was trembling.”

She characterized the outcome as a shared victory for others who had endured similar trauma.

“We know this guy like the back of our hand, and I literally had to live with him for years, and I had to be in the band dealing with everything,” she said.

“It was really hard for us, and I just hope that whoever was on our side, I hope you're smiling right now. I hope you're celebrating. This was a big win for us, and we can finally continue our healing process.”

Jurors also heard testimony from Chezni Jones, who described a 2005 encounter when Payne was a Virgin Islands Police Department officer and her mentor. She testified that Payne lured her to a

beach under the pretext of showing defensive tactics and attempted to make her touch him inappropriately before she escaped.

Testimony connected to Dene Dessuit's civil case in the Virgin Islands was excluded from the Florida proceedings, though her 2022 complaint triggered Payne's expulsion from the Legislature.

### **From Ethics Investigation to Criminal Sentence**

The case traces back to April 2022, when the V.I. Consortium first reported that Payne was under Senate investigation for sexual harassment of a female staffer. Subsequent reporting detailed allegations from multiple women, including Jones and Emilien.

Governor Albert Bryan Jr. later called the allegations "serious and disturbing" and ordered then-Attorney General Denise George to investigate.

On July 20, 2022, following an ethics inquiry, the Legislature voted 14–1 to expel Payne from the 34th Legislature for violations of its harassment and ethics rules.

In September 2023, Payne was arrested in Orlando on a Duval County warrant charging him with sexual battery. In March 2024, the V.I. Supreme Court dismissed Payne's civil challenge to his expulsion, affirming the Legislature's constitutional authority.

The Florida prosecution culminated in the October 2025 guilty verdict and today's 25-year prison sentence.

### **Representation**

Payne was represented at trial by attorneys Christopher Carson and Darcy Galnor. The prosecution team consisted of Assistant State Attorneys Jaclyn Blair and Shaina Ruth.

His mother, sister, girlfriend, and brother, former Senator Clarence Payne, were present during trial proceedings.