

Older Virgin Islanders Use Senior Mock Session to Press for Health Coverage Beyond Medicare and Insurance

Senior participants said the mock legislation addressed real needs, including dental, vision and hearing care, as speakers warned that retirement income, Medicare, medication costs and utility bills are not enough for many older residents.

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Edna O'Connor-Freeman, representing Senator Angel Bolques Jr., speaks during the Senior Mock Session, where older Virgin Islanders debated expanded health benefits and support services for seniors and disabled residents. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE.

The 36th Legislature came alive on Wednesday, as a cohort of older Americans filed into the chambers for the annual Senior Mock Session.

The event offers senior Virgin Islanders an opportunity to participate in the lawmaking process by deliberating on a mock bill. Senate President Milton Potter said of the event, “Democracy is not a spectator sport” and “good legislation is strengthened when those most affected by it have a seat at the table.” Senator Novelle Francis described the day as “civics in action.”

Not only were lawmakers ably represented by members of the senior community, but so too were every position that participates in Legislative hearings, including the post auditor, clerks, stenographer, and photographer.

The matter up for deliberation was Bill 36-0000, which seeks to amend Title 19 of the Virgin Islands Code, Chapter 17, relating to the medical assistant program by establishing an ancillary health coverage benefit for older adults and disabled beneficiaries.

Leonilda Jarvis, who represented Senator Alma Francis Heyliger, noted that due to the inflated cost of living, some seniors must “choose between paying bills or purchasing medications.” She suggested that the mock legislation be tweaked to “ensure that the limits in this bill include seniors who are underserved due to financial caps.”

“My Medicare and my government retirement is not enough to keep me going, and so I am concerned,” said Patricia Sage, who represented Senator Franklin Johnson. She was among several who commented on the eligibility benchmarks in the mock bill and suggested that it “should go up higher to 65.”

Others, like Edna O’Connor-Freeman, who represented Senator Angel Bolques Jr. and Noreen Joseph, who acted as Senator Ray Fonseca, questioned the source of funds for the mock proposal. Verna Rollins, who sat in Senator Carla Joseph’s chair, urged a data-driven approach. “I appreciate the intent of the sponsor of this bill, but at this moment I can’t support it,” Ms. Rollins said.

Earlene Wagner represented Senator Clifford Joseph. She minced no words on the experience of living in the USVI as a senior. “The cost of senior living right now in the Virgin Islands is way over \$20,000 a year... It is too expensive. WAPA alone is taking your money,” she lamented.

In Senator Marvin Blyden’s seat was Winnifred Anthony-Todman. She encouraged lawmakers to “protect our most vulnerable population, our seniors, by ensuring that they have access to vital and important services and essential care, hearing, visual, and dental care.” She emphasized that these are not a “luxury.”

“I am asking that we now help our seniors, so as to prevent expensive emergency treatment, avoidable complication, and more dependence on families,” Ms. Anthony-Todman pleaded.

Based on a 2020 census, “21% of the population of [the] Virgin Islands are senior citizens,” said Clara Jn Baptiste-Xavier, Senator Kurt Vialet’s representative. She reported that many do not qualify for health insurance and are “dying from health care neglect.” Unable to make out-of-pocket payments, “many of our seniors are forced to delay, forgo medical appointments, or purchase the necessary prescribed meds necessary to fight health or to maintain adequate health standards,” Ms. Jn Baptiste-Xavier warned.

“While it is never easy to care for oneself in one's older years, all our seniors ask for is a helping hand to help lift them up,” she stated.

“Now is time for me to live as stress-free as possible. Bill number 36-000 helps to alleviate some of the financial burdens we face when trying to live long, healthy, and meaningful lives,” added Delores Hodge, Senator Avery Lewis’ representative.

Alphone Stalliard, the day’s Senate president, stated that “the least we can do is to ensure that our health care coverage reflects the full scope of their needs.” He promised his age-mates that “this legislation sees you, this legislation hears you, and this legislation will not leave you behind.”

The mock bill received the seniors' green light, signalling to elected lawmakers the need for support services not covered by insurance programs. “We may say mock...session, but the issue at hand is very real. So I don't really take it as a mock. We did it for fun, but it is real,” Senator Dwayne DeGraff said.

Wednesday’s mock session was one of several events to mark Older Americans Month, with the Department of Human Services playing a key role in its execution.