

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Coverdale Talks Possibility Of Voter Disenfranchisement, Discrimination From Elections Board Members

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Technology is a delicate thing, and if you're not properly trained, it's easy to be misinterpreted. -- *Tonjia Coverdale, Ph.D.*

Dr. Tonjia Coverdale, the former technology territorial coordinator of the Elections System of the Virgin Islands, who resigned her position just days before the 2014 General Election because of conflicts with the Joint Boards of Elections over the use of the DS200 voting machines, spoke to the *VI Consortium* about the delicate matter of handling voting machines, and that those placed in authority over them should be well

trained.

Coverdale's explanation was not an attempt to accuse members of the Joint Boards of Elections of mal-intent or willfully trying to skew the election, she explained. Rather, she said her efforts were to bring to the fore the possibility of human error when persons who are not properly trained handle the machines.

"I'm not going to sneak about my concern of [voter disenfranchisement] as being Coverdale began, "but more so in the fact that technology is a not properly trained, it's easy to be misinterpreted."



Tonjia Coverdale, Ph.D.

Coverdale went on: "For example, there are good errors and bad errors. Not all errors are bad. Technology is designed to give you feedback that is to place you on a straight and narrow road, to allow you to put any information in and get the most accurate output. So if you had bumps along the road it will tell you, 'hey, you are at a bump,' [but] it's also going to point you in the right direction."

Coverdale continued her point, using an example that she demonstrated to members of the Board of Elections in the past.

"We have the capability of voting for one senator, two senators, no senator -- you don't have to vote for all seven; that's just our right as voters. However, the way the machines are programmed, if I, voter X, go in and I vote for three senators, the machine is going to think, and it's going to give what might be perceived by an undertrained worker as an error, even though it's just telling me, you undervoted, do you want to continue -- that's well within my right. I don't know how their workers were trained, and the fact that [the machines] weren't centralized worries me," Coverdale said.

If the machines were being handled by Board of Elections members in a single location, Coverdale said she would feel better.

"I wouldn't worry if they brought all the votes back to one place and a trained team, like the Board of Elections did it themselves," she said, "but if you have someone at X school or Y school or Z school, or A school or B school, we don't know [how] they were trained,

if they were trained in a certain way."

Coverdale explained that people who may have undervoted, but because they were not given the chance to insert their ballots into the tabulator themselves, are not expecting elections workers to throw out their ballots because they undervoted -- when the machines would have clearly noted the error and given the option to correct it.

"I'm not saying it did happen," Coverdale clarified, "I'm just saying that these are the machines that are new machines, and I'm not sure if they



Tonjia Coverdale, Ph.D.

Later, Coverdale discussed the unpleasant way she felt she was treated by certain members of the Joint Boards of Elections, adding that while she embraced the opportunity to help bring Virgin Islands' election technology to new levels, the experience was "horrible."

"I had a horrible experience," Coverdale said emphatically. "There were members of the Board who were very disrespectful to me."

Coverdale, 36, who is also a professor at the University of the Virgin Islands is originally from Brooklyn, N.Y., and said she was also discriminated against based on gender, place of origin and age.

"Of course they told me to go back to where I came from. They never wanted to hear what I had to say -- they wanted to know who I was and who I think I am, and what makes me qualified," she said. "I experienced a lot of discrimination, and would venture to say that it bordered on probably gender discrimination, age discrimination, and also I guess origin discrimination, if that's a type of discrimination."

She continued: "So no, my experience personally was not that great, but I knew that I had something special and unique to offer to the Virgin Islands in my expertise. So the opportunity was for me to be able to help bring the Virgin Islands to a new era in their election technology was exciting for me."

Dr. Coverdale first came to the territory in 2010 when she accepted an assistant professorship position to teach computer information systems at the University of the Virgin Islands. She holds three degrees in the field of Information Systems, including a BS from Morgan State University, MBA from Georgia State University, and PhD from Morgan State University. She is the first African-American and woman to graduate with a doctoral degree in Information Systems from any of the 106 Historical Black Colleges and Universities in the United States. She has past work experiences with technical firms, including IBM, HP, and Accenture.

Coverdale says her love for the Virgin Islands and its people hasn't changed and she will continue to contribute to the community. She once participated in the [Mrs. US Virgin Islands Pageant](#) (for married women), and remains very active, especially on St. Thomas, where she lives.