

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Students Learn Good Consumer Skills At DLCA's Consumer Protection, Weights And Measures Week

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The annual recognition of National Consumer Protection Week celebrated concurrently with Weights and Measures Week, saw Department of Licensing and Consumer Affairs (DLCA) officials in both the St. Croix and St. Thomas-St. John island districts organizing activities designed to teach the territory's youngest citizens good consumer skills.

The week-long festivities took place from March 2-6 and on Thursday, Eulalie Rivera Elementary School 6th graders visited DLCA's Golden Rock office on St. Croix where they learned about expired goods and how to comparison shop.

"Caribbean and Canadian expiration dates are different from ours," explained Arthur Urgent, inspector in DLCA's weights and measures division. "We start with the month, the date, and the year; they start with the date, the month, and the year. So, when you are shopping, you have to look out for that because it could confuse you."

Urgent also explained the BB or "Best Before" labeling system used to track the shelf life of goods found in local stores.

"BBE means 'best before expired.' If something says 04/15, it means it's good until the end of the month," he added. "After that, it's no longer good."

Luis Santos, weights and measures inspector who spearheaded this week's events on St. Croix, highlighted the students' instruction on how to compare food items.

"They are learning what is the best buy. Not necessarily because something is on sale means it's a deal, sometimes you have to compare," he told *VI Consortium*. "I have seen things in the store on sale, and the product right next to it, you sometimes get a better deal; so you have to compare and shop around."

Dido O'Reilly, consumer compliance and protection officer I, provided the students with tips on what to look for when visiting local businesses.

"What is a business supposed to have when operating in the Virgin Islands and also stateside," she asked the youngsters. Their answers ranged from rules, to warrants, to laws. However, O'Reilly explained that all businesses should have a license in order to operate.

"If you don't see that license up on the wall, it's a violation," she said. "They shouldn't be performing business, period. And it will have a date on it showing you when that license expires because every year, they're supposed to come in and renew that license."

O'Reilly also informed the up-and-coming consumers of the second thing they should look for in a business -- the store policy.

"The policy states what the business expects from the customers, meaning, if you go and you buy something, it should tell you how many days you have to return the item or what to do if it's not working properly," she said. She pointed out that at the territory's K-mart stores, the return policy is 30 days for items that are not electronics, and 15 days for electronics.

The youngsters were then guided through the correct process of returning an item to a store. O'Reilly said they should first repackage the item, locate the receipt, and visit the store's customer service desk.

Then, raising the bar in her presentation, O'Reilly asked the students what action they should take if they visited K-Mart to return an electronic item within the 15-day period, but the customer service representative would not perform the transaction.

One youngster suggested talking to the manager, which O'Reilly praised. The instructor went on to ask the students what should they do if they did not receive help from the manager.

One sixth-grade girl announced, "Call consumer protection." O'Reilly confirmed the answer was correct, and further explained that her agency would investigate the dispute and apply the applicable law to it.

Speaking of the law, Beatrice Gumbs, territorial director of consumer services, said her primary role is to ensure all laws are followed.

"My job here is if my staff, after they have conducted an investigation, if there is a dispute between a retailer and their citation or violation, or a consumer and a retailer, it then comes to me if the dispute cannot be worked out," she said. "I deal strictly with the law; I do not deal with personalities."

Gumbs went on to explain the different functions of DLCA's weights and measures, and consumer protection divisions.

"Weights and measures, they are not for you or against you; consumer protection defends you," she said, adding, "whatever the reason, until we do our investigation, you are the priority."

At the end of Gumbs' presentation, one student asked why consumer protection is necessary.

"If you have a problem with a retail shop, what will you do? We sit in between two parties and we mediate, and we find out what the law says, and we apply it to the problem that you have. We try to solve the problems according to what the law says," Gumbs responded.