

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Acting Department Of Health Commissioner A Continuous No-Show At Senate Hearings

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ST. CROIX -- Senator Kurt Vialet, chairman of the Committee on Health, Hospitals & Human Services, expressed frustration at a hearing yesterday after Acting Commissioner of Health, Ms. Phyllis Wallace, Ed.D, failed to show for yet another Senate hearing to discuss matters pertinent to the territory's healthcare sector.

In fact, it was so important that a representative, preferable the health commissioner, be present at yesterday's hearing at the Fritz Lawetz Conference Room in Frederiksted, that Sen. Sammuell Sanes, sponsor of bill No. 31-0123 -- "an Act amending Title 27 of Virgin Islands Code, Chapter 1, Subchapter 2, Section 34, to require doctors and physicians to disclose any financial ownership or interest in any medical laboratory within or outside

the Virgin Islands, and from referring patients to a laboratory in which they have a financial interest" -- was forced to hold the measure in committee.

"The fact is although there are some technicalities in the bill that need to be rectified, the most glaring component here is the Dept. of Health. And it is my understanding that an invitation was sent to them, but apparently, even though we're in 2015, if one person doesn't show up, the show stops," Sanes said.

He added: "To me it's incredible that they could not send a representative. To me it's injustice, and it's a disrespect to this body that we have 20 million people in the Dept. of Health (Sanes jokingly exaggerated the number) and they could not send anyone to testify on this bill."

Governor Kenneth Mapp withdrew Wallace's nomination on her request in July. The decision was relayed via press release on the 10th of the same month.

"Dr. Wallace has asked me to withdraw her nomination for personal reasons. In addition, Commissioner Designate Wallace has agreed to continue serving in an acting capacity until I name her successor," Mapp said in relation to the withdrawal.

Violet said the governor needed to move quickly in identifying a new nominee, as the matters concerning the hospital are "large."

"It seems that every time the commissioner of health is invited to a Senate hearing, she's absent," Violet said. "And it is high time that the governor name a permanent commissioner of the Dept. of Health, [because] the concerns of that department are large, [and] we can't have individuals leading departments too afraid to come before the Legislature and testify. And this is on a regularly basis.

"So I think it's time for us to get a permanent selection for the position. I had a discussion with the governor, and I'm hoping that he names somebody very, very soon," Violet concluded.

Mapp had announced the nomination of Wallace on April 8. In his remarks, the governor said he, along with Lieutenant Governor Osbert Potter, charged Wallace to "first and foremost lead our proposed reformation of the hospital systems in the Virgin Islands."

It is not known why Wallace asked that her name be withdrawn, however, the occurrence was a setback for the administration, as the governor was adamant about changing the current system with Wallace at the helm of those efforts. Wallace was also tasked with developing a new process for hospital operations in the territory.

The chief executive has on multiple occasions expressed his frustration with the disjointed manner in which the islands' hospitals, community clinics and private health providers are managed. And has called for a system where data can be aggregated, "so that as a government, we are able to say with confidence what are the incidents of diabetes in the territory, and what are the demographics, [including] age and gender. What are our issues with cancer in territory — age, gender, district."

Feature Image: Acting Health Commissioner Ms. Phyllis Wallace, Ed.D.

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