

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Bill Raising Retirement Age For V.I.P.D., Fire Service And B.O.C. Employees To 63 Passes First Hurdle

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ST. THOMAS -- A bill sponsored by Senator Novelle Francis that raises the retirement age from 60 to 63 for firefighters, V.I.P.D. and Bureau of Corrections employees was unanimously approved by the Committee on Education and Workforce Development on Tuesday.

Mr. Francis said [Bill No. 31-0372](#) was birthed following conversations with Police Commissioner Delroy Richards, who had highlighted the manpower problem at the force, and raising the age of retirement as a way of keeping employees working longer.

"Some may say this bill is long overdue, but I believe timing is everything," Mr. Francis said during the hearing, held at the Earl B. Ottley Legislative Hall.

The bill, originally intended only for the V.I.P.D, was amended to include B.O.C. and the Fire Service, as those departments also face manpower shortages. It would help buy time for the Government Employees Retirement System, because the longer government employees work, the more they contribute to G.E.R.S., Mr. Francis argued. And the measure would help employees better manage their finances as Social Security benefits begin at 62, giving them two sources of income.

The current law states that all government employees can apply for retirement by age 55, but can request an additional five years.

The bill includes a five-year sunset provision -- a stipulation that an agency or program be disbanded or terminated at the end of a fixed period unless it is formally renewed -- which Mr. Francis said allows the bill to be examined with the times, and extended or discontinued.

"The number 60 seems to have been reasonable back then in terms of age by which there should be a separation between law enforcement and the rigorous requirement that's associated with [it]," he said. "I wanted to have that sunset date embedded so that we could take a look at it in the next five years and make a determination. We could eliminate or extend it if necessary."

The measure received universal support from senators and invited testifiers alike.

"I agree that the time has come for the Legislature to reexamine the mandatory retirement age for law enforcement officers," Division of Personnel Director Milton Potter said.

Everette Hansen, assistant director of B.O.C., thanked Mr. Francis for sponsoring the measure, calling it an "important topic," while highlighting the employment needs of B.O.C.

"The Bureau of Corrections is chronically understaffed and have sadly forcibly retired most of our skilled personnel due to the current age of retirement," Mr. Hansen said.

The bill has been forwarded to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary for further vetting.

Correction: August 3, 2016:

A previous version of this story, because of a formatting error, included an incorrect headline. The story has been updated.