

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Youth Commission In USVI Highlighted As Way To End School-To-Prison Pipeline At Senate Hearing

Education / **Published On April 05, 2017 09:14 AM /**

Donna Bellot **April 05, 2017**



ST. THOMAS -- A call to end the cycle of what is being referred to as a “school-to-prison pipeline” in the territory, highlighted the agenda of the Committee on Education, Youth and Recreation during a committee hearing held on Tuesday at the Earl B. Ottley Legislative Hall. Department of Human Services Commissioner Designee, Felicia Blyden, gave testimony stating that a vital part of moving forward is reestablishing the Youth Commission in the Virgin Islands.

“I don’t believe that there is a question that there needs to be a focus on youth; that there needs to be some arm or mechanism that is able to harness much of what is happening in silo [isolated from others], so to speak, in this community, so that we can be able to

work more collaboratively,” Ms. Blyden said. She believes the youth commission as mandated by legislature would do exactly that.

According to Ms. Blyden’s testimony, the key focus is trying to fund and provide more programs directed at prevention rather than solely relying on intervention, to allow the youths—and to a certain extent adults—an opportunity to prosper in the territory. It is her belief that these programs would help to address issues before they even begin, and in turn reduce the role of intervention programs. She added that the Department of Human Services in collaboration with other departments, could become change agents, by working with various programs currently available in the territory to help bolster the community.

Ms. Blyden hopes to fund and bring online--through the establishment of the youth commission—additional Head Start programs, Day Cares, and a robust prevention program. She also believes additional funding and staffing is necessary in order to ensure the success of these programs.

“We use much of our resources as it relates to the juvenile justice component having social workers work with individuals after they have committed offences; the YRC [Young Rehabilitation Center] component being able to try and rehabilitate, and our position is that we would like to—one of the lingos that was shared school to prison pipeline—we would like to close off that pipeline. We would like to work with the various programs in the community to do so, but the staff that we have is stretched to the point where they are just maintaining the capacity of work to deal with much of what exists which is that intervention piece,” said Ms. Blyden.

Catherine Hendry, commissioner of the Department of Labor, echoed the sentiments of Ms. Blyden in favor of the reestablishment of the Youth Commission, calling it essential. She said the Youth Commission could provide a strategic and operational plan with the knowledge of the capabilities of each department, and by laying out terms and conditions on what each one could do. “Commissioner Blyden hit it on the head, intervention, prevention; as for us it’s all about the workforce, it’s all about getting our youth prepared,” she said.

Chair of the committee Senator Jean Forde posed a question on the viability of nonprofit organizations that operate in the territory with the expressed purpose of meeting the needs of the youth and “closing the pipeline”. In response, Ms. Blyden assured the Senator that nonprofit organizations were in fact essential and had their place in the community, because they provide valuable services through creative means of interaction with the community. She continued to say that nonprofits actually augment and support many of the programs that the government provides.

And She was asked whether [funding that the Senate in recent times has given to nonprofits](#), could instead be used at D.H.S. Ms. Blyden said D.H.S. could offer grant-writing assistance to help these organizations receive funding already available to them by the federal government, adding that D.H.S. itself needed additional funding if it were to take on the challenge of ending the school-to-prison pipeline, and other pressing youth challenges.

Peter Seipel—territorial director of athletics for the Department of Education—gave testimony that the D.O.E. has realized the existence of the school-to-prison pipeline, and has worked in collaboration with the Department of Sports, Parks, and Recreation to provide extracurricular activities to reduce the cultivation of this pipeline. Mr. Seipel says they have done this by supporting and providing for interscholastic sporting activities in public schools in the St. Thomas/St John and St. Croix Districts. So far they have provide funding to Volleyball, Cross Country, Baseball and Girls Basketball in Elementary Schools. Five-hundred thousand dollars in appropriated funds have been used to support travel costs for student athletic activities. The two departments have also developed relationships with Puerto Rico, Tortola, and various States, to provide Virgin Islands youth exposure to athletic opportunities on the national and international stage.

The agencies called on to ensure the reestablishment and success of the Youth Commission are The Department of Sports, Parks and Recreation; the Department of Labor; the Department of Human Services; and The Department of Education.

The committee also discussed other interdepartmental collaborations targeted at ensuring the positive development of the youths in the territory.