

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Territory Requests More Time To Implement Real ID Act; Bill Favoring Outside Management For JFL Held In Committee

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A bill that would allow U.S. Virgin Islands seniors to use their driver's license (soon to be Real ID Act compliant) or other official government-issued IDs as means to receive any of the many benefits senior citizens in the territory receive from the local government -- instead of having to secure a special ID through the Department of Human Services -- breezed through the Committee on Health and Human Services on Monday, with lawmakers agreeing with the bill's author, Senator Jean Forde, that the measure would make life easier for seniors.

Bureau of Motor Vehicle Director, Lawrence Olive, said B.M.V. had requested an extension to complete its work on Real ID Act compliance. Senators pointed out that the extension was yet another upon several already given, but Mr. Olive pointed to other states whose leaders had asked for extensions as well. He said BMV would be compliant with the senior citizen bill's intent by June.

The territory was given until the end of 2016 to come into compliance with [Real ID Act](#), which was enacted by Congress in 2005 on the recommendation of the 9/11 Commission. Mr. Olive assured lawmakers back then that it would be ready before the end of 2016.

"We should have [the Real ID] completed before the end of this year," [he said](#). "The new vendor is already in place; we're just waiting on the signature and contracts so we could get it going to the A.G.'s office for their review. Once that is done, the vendor is ready to start right now."

Mr. Forde said the measure for seniors was birthed following an encounter with a man, who said he was having trouble using his driver's license to receive the government benefits, which include free tuition to the University of the Virgin Islands; free VITRAN bus rides; half off on driver's license and registration fees; as well as a 25 percent discount on public transportation.

"To my mind that doesn't make sense. Either we mean to provide the benefits to senior citizens or we do not," Mr. Forde said about the current setup.

Another measure, sponsored by Senator Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly, requiring the board of the Juan F. Luis Hospital to solicit proposals for the selection of a third-party management company or health system to manage the hospital, was held in committee.

Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly said hospital management had been overtaken by "greed" and were unable to do what's right for patients. However, the hospital's acting CEO, Richard Evangelista, said management problems were instead a result of lack of funding.

Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly worried that despite her attempts to assuage the issues at the hospital, that the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services would eventually take away its certification from the beleaguered hospital; a situation that would certainly have grave implications for St. Croix.