

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Health-Related Boards Share Challenges With Lawmakers

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ST. THOMAS -- The Committee on Health Hospitals and Human Services, chaired by Sen. Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly, held a meeting at the Capitol Building on Thursday, to receive testimony on the Virgin Islands Department of Health (DOH) and health related boards.

"We asked board representatives to share an overview of their boards, challenges and to address changes to the law that will help enhance their ability to carry out mandates," said Sen. O'Reilly.

Some of the major issues plaguing the various medical boards are the lack of a consistent meeting place, the need for appropriated funds to purchase meals during prolonged board meetings; to obtain a copy of the law as it pertains to the perspective medical field; and not having a full complement of board members and/or members serving with expired terms.

Jerry Smith, chairman of the Board of Physical Therapy said, "The V.I. Board of Physical Therapy has four out five members serving current terms and one serving an expired term.

Similarly, Deborah Richardson-Peter, territorial director for the Office of Professional Licensure and Health Planning at the V.I. Department of Health (DOH), stated that the Podiatry Board is a five-member board that only has one current member.

"Were public services announcements made to inform the public of the board vacancies?" inquired Sen. Marvin Blyden. Frank Odum, chair of the V.I. Board of Medical Examiners stated that the board has not conducted any.

Lawmakers also considered the consolidation of personnel and resources of the health-related boards to help them meet mandates.

"Is there a general mandate that is standard that can assist with the consolidation of the boards?" asked Sen. Dwayne DeGraff. Michelle Davis, commissioner of DOH stated that such a mandate did not exist. However, DOH is willingly to work with lawmakers to create a standardize system.

Sen. Brian Smith said, "There are fifteen boards that each requires seven members. We must do something with the limited resources. We have to streamline boards at once because we don't have sufficient physicians to fill board vacancies."

However, Ian Douglass, chairman of the Pharmacy Board said, "In respect to consolidation, each of the boards have specific needs that may not mirror each other. For example, we are frequently involved in inspections. These are required for renewal of Pharmacy Licenses every year.

Senators also offered recommendations that will improve the boards.

"To expedite the process, the Legislature can select names from a pool of qualified people and if the governor fails to appoint them, then after 90 days if there are still vacancies, then board members can be confirmed by the senate. That is one way to complement a board fully. Another method is to mandate individuals seeking medical licenses in the Territory to serve on the board," Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly.

"I will recommend reducing the required board members from seven to five and to allow existing members to continue to serve beyond their term," said Sen. Kurt Vialet.

Separately, Ms. Davis gave an update Maternal and Child Health with Special Health Needs Program (MCH), the Mental Health Program and Substance Abuse Program.

"In fiscal year 2016, MCH served over 5,000 patients territory-wide. Along with direct care, MCH provides resources and supports to build capacity among program staff and

partners,” she said.

The Division of Mental Health, Alcoholism and Drug Dependency Services has a total of 754 registered clients throughout the territory. So far, with the collaborative efforts with other services, the division has achieved a National Health Service Corps certification, according to Berlina Wallace-Berube, director of the Division of Mental Health, Alcoholism and Drug Dependency.

Mrs. Wallace-Berube also stated that some of the prevention initiatives for the Substance Abuse Program included Synar inspections for tobacco compliance, merchant education to reduce tobacco and alcohol sales to minors and airing a radio campaign during Prevention Week to promote parental involvement.