

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Committee of the Whole to Meet August 5 to Dig Deeper into \$1 Million Avera Deal, \$2.1 Million Strategy Group Contract

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Ernice Gilbert **July 26, 2020**



The Senate Committee of the Whole will meet on August 5 to investigate two contracts that have raised alarms in the community: the Dept. of Health \$1 million contact tracing contract awarded to Avera, a company owned by Governor Albert Bryan's daughter, Aliyah Bryan, and Mr. Bryan's friend who the governor said he mentored, Michael K. Pemberton. The company has no background in contact tracing and was awarded the deal in 72 hours. As of last week, Avera had yet to receive a license to conduct business in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Also last week, the company of Mr. Bryan's close friend, John Engerman, who led Mr. Bryan's 2018 campaign as manager, [was awarded a \\$2.1 million Virgin Islands Housing Finance Authority contract](#) over three other bidders to provide "public relations and marketing communication services across a wide variety of platforms to further amplify the VIHFA CDBG-DR initiatives." The contract is for three years and will be paid with federal dollars.

The V.I.H.F.A. contract was the latest deal awarded to Mr. Engerman's firm, The Strategy Group, which has contracts with a vast number of government departments and agencies.

In a recent Senate hearing, lawmakers complained about a \$271,000 contract awarded to The Strategy Group which was not listed under Property and Procurement. Instead, according to Senator Kurt Violet, who chairs the Committee on Finance and has to carefully parse the government's finances during budget hearings, the contract listed the V.I. Public Finance Authority as the vendor. The job description of the \$271,000 contract was to cut 200 checks to fishermen who were awarded a \$10 million grant from the federal government, according to Mr. Violet.

In a release issued Saturday, the Office of Senate President Novelle Francis said the lawmaker would convene a Committee of the Whole "to allow for fact-finding on the contracts recently awarded by the Virgin Islands Housing Finance Authority and the Department of Health."

According to Mr. Francis, the public deserves a true accounting of the contracting and procurement process that led to the award of the contracts in question. During the scheduled Committee of the Whole, he also plans to delve into contracts reportedly granted under exigency circumstances.

"It is understandable why the community feels that their trust has been violated," Mr. Francis said. "These actions come at a time when many Virgin Islanders are in distress. The territory has come under intense criticism time and time again for our mishandling of public funds – especially those awarded by the federal government. The Legislature has a responsibility to ensure that our funds are being managed in a way that is above reproach, especially at a time when our economic challenges demand that we stretch every dollar as far as possible to meet the needs of our community."