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Bill Aiming to Protect Elderly Virgin Islanders From Financial Exploitation Becomes Law

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A bill sponsored by Senator Allison DeGaozon that seeks to protect elderly Virgin Islanders from financial exploitation was recently signed into law by Governor Albert Bryan, Ms. DeGazon's office has made known.

Bill No. 33-0077, now Act. No. 8318 is an act amending title 34, chapter 15 of the Virgin Islands Code relating to the prevention of abuse of elderly persons and dependent adults to prohibit the financial exploitation of elderly persons or dependent adults.

“I am so proud right now. Financial exploitation of the elderly affects all of us. It may be through an elderly parent, grand parent, aunt, uncle, or neighbors. Elder financial exploitation is a significant problem now and is expected to worsen with the aging of our community,” the senator

said.

Mr. Bryan in his transmittal letter to Senate President Novelle Francis, said he was in full support of the measure, and also suggested some revisions be made to the bill to increase protections for elders and combat any acts of elder abuse, according to the news release.

According to AARP research, the average victim can lose \$120,000 to financial exploitation. Repeated, out-of-the-ordinary cash withdrawals are a big clue to exploitation and scams. Most perpetrators are people known to the victim, such as family members, caregivers, or other workers in the home, making it difficult for elders or dependent adults to speak against them, according to the news release.

“This type of abuse and mistreatment must not continue to plague our community. Bill 33-0077 is a multi-agency and systemic approach to protecting our elders and Dependent Adults from financial exploitation,” Ms. DeGazon said when presenting the bill to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary in June which is observed as World Elder Abuse Awareness Month. “It would be fitting for us to join the rest of the nation against Elder Abuse and lend our voices to educate and empower people around the world to be a part of the critical network of safeguarding seniors in our homes and communities.”

Elder financial exploitation is increasingly prevalent when seniors are isolated and alone with their abusers; for instance, during the present COVID-19 pandemic mainly because they are unable to do much of their business for themselves, the release said.

According to the Virgin Islands Police Department in April 2020, the Economic Crime Unit, after the introduction of Bill No. 33-0077, was given a mandate to bring all pending cases to the Commissioner’s Office for review. As a result of the review, a total of 21 cases of economic crimes against the elderly were processed and executed in the territory and cases involving Financial Exploitation of the Elderly are given priority.

The bill received support from VIPD, the Lt. Governor’s office, AARP, the Department of Justice, and the Department of Human Services.