

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Opinion | I Was Denied An Opportunity To Testify At Senate About The Health Care Crisis In The V.I., Here's My Testimony

Opinion / **Published On February 06, 2018 12:06 PM /**

Staff **February 06, 2018**



Editor's Note: *Ruby Simmonds Esannason, who said she was denied an opportunity to testify during a Senate Committee on Health, Hospitals, and Human Services hearing on Wednesday, Jan. 31, thought her message so important that she submitted it to The Consortium on Monday to be shared with our readers.*

Good day Madam Chair, members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony on Bill 32-0026, a 39 page bill which sets out standards for the manner in which pets are cared for in the Virgin Islands. It speaks to matters such as Animal Health

Centers or Animal Medical Centers; it establishes standards for animal shelters; it speaks of animals having proper records, proper lighting and ventilation, and adequate potable water. Yes, this bill is quite thorough in its attention to the needs of pets in the Virgin Islands. Initially, I was going to speak directly to the bill because I do have some questions about some of the provisions, and then segue into my main concern which is the health crisis that has faced this territory for the last four and a half months. But honestly, I don't see the need to pretend.

I have gone to too many funerals, I have offered sympathy to friends who have lost parents and other family members, and I in turn have received the sympathy of others for our family's losses as well. I have questions about those persons who were evacuated from the Virgin Islands following the hurricanes. In his state of the territory message, Governor Kenneth Mapp stated that 682 individuals were medically evacuated since Hurricane Irma. Of those, some 248 remain on the mainland. What happened to the other 434 persons? How many of them came back home in the cargo section of the plane? How many came back in urns in someone's carry-on luggage? I can tell you specifically about the ones I know of, including my son-in-law, the aunts of two of my step-daughters, and a very dear friend who was laid to rest less than two weeks ago. The Governor said that the Commissioner of Health visited with each of the patients and their families. I know for sure that she never visited my son-in-law, Sergeant Aaron Hodge nor contacted his wife or his son. Aaron was evacuated to Puerto Rico after Hurricane Irma, but we didn't know where he was.

Through the contact of friends, my daughter was able to get a telephone number of the hospital in Puerto Rico and the person with whom she spoke told her that the "refugees from Virgin Islands were going to be placed in shelters." This is not hearsay. I was standing close enough to hear what was said. I am not sure what the conditions of those shelters were - if they were up to the standards set forth in this bill for the animals of this territory. Nonetheless, my daughter and I went to VITEMA the next day seeking information. The person who was VITEMA's liaison to the hospital could not even get through to the people in Puerto Rico to get any information for us. We were told to contact Mr. Reuben Molloy. We called and left messages, but never received a return call. While Aaron was in Puerto Rico he told me that drinking water was being rationed. He was being given water in a container the size of a small fruit cup. That's about three ounces. This was what was being given to a full grown adult. However, this bill provides that dogs and cats must receive specified amounts of potable water every day. Sergeant Hodge was eventually evacuated to Atlanta Georgia, where he died on November 15, 2017.

We are just one family. This is just one story. How many other hundreds of Virgin Islanders have similar stories to tell? When will the hearing be held to allow them to tell of the conditions under which their loved ones died.

A story in the St. John Source for December 9, 2017, said that according to the Health and Human Services officials reporting to this committee, there would be no "home for the holidays" for Virgin Islanders evacuated for medical care since the hurricane. The news story further notes that according to the Assistant Commissioner of Health, there was no plan to return the remains of the medical evacuees who had died since leaving the Virgin Islands. Why is there no hearing to address that matter? Sometime in the aftermath of the hurricanes, the CEO of Schneider Hospital made a plea over the

airwaves for families to come and collect their relatives who had been deemed dischargeable from the hospital because they needed the space to take in other patients. In some instances, the families had no place to put their loved ones once they were discharged from the hospital. Why is there no hearing to address this matter? I understand that in October alone, the Department of Public Works had 50 burials and that is just in St. Thomas. There is pain and grief in these Virgin Islands. There are new widows and widowers. There are new orphans. All we need to do is look at the obituary section of the newspapers and see how many of our folks have departed since September 6, 2017.

I note that in a report to this committee on December 8, 2017, the CEO of the Schneider Regional Medical Center, indicated that given the financial status and the damage to the physical structures, people had to be laid off. However, I note that Bill 32-0026, Section 179, subsection 9, allows for the hiring of full or part-time staff as needed, to facilitate the functions of the Veterinary Board. While I understand that the Department of Health and the hospitals are separate entities, I know that the Virgin Islands treasury is one pot, we are one people and the same people are being impacted by the actions of our leaders, and this committee has oversight for both. Where are our priorities.

I am sure that the provisions of this bill are important. I am sure that there are measures here that need to be addressed, but is this the time to talk about pet groomers and pet shelters, and pet shops when we have no hospitals, we have inadequate health care and people are struggling trying to bring their loved ones home?

I know that animals in the territory were also severely impacted by the hurricanes, that they also lost people significant to them. I can speak of one specifically. Sergeant Hodge was a member of the Canine Unit of the Virgin Islands Police Department. His partner was Alph, a canine officer. Alph missed Aaron while he was hospitalized and away from the job. Alph was at the airport when his fellow police officer was brought home aboard a Delta flight (accompanied by his wife and son), and Alph said goodbye to his partner and fellow officer at his funeral on November 30, 2017. But nothing in this bill is going to ease the pain of loss that Alph feels, as it will not ease the pain of loss that Aaron's wife, his sons, his mother, or any other members of his family feel. It will not ease the pain of loss of the hundreds of other Virgin Islanders who have lost loved ones since the hurricanes. It will not answer the questions we have about the state of health care in this territory and what we do going forward. God forbid, we have another hurricane anytime soon. Do we evacuate before the storm? Are we prepared to deal with what comes next?

Madame Chair and members of the committee, I ask that a hearing be held to allow the people of the Virgin Islands to tell their stories, to ask their questions and to offer their suggestions about how we can handle our medical crises in the future. I thank you for the opportunity to put my concerns on the record.

Submitted on Monday by: Ruby Simmonds Esannason