

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Senator Rivera-O'Reilly Writes Letter To Governor Bryan Seeking Signature On Dental Therapist Bill

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Outgoing Senator Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly has written to Governor Albert Bryan seeking his approval of a bill Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly says will open up dental care to about 25,600 Virgin Islanders who are in need of it. The measure was approved by the full body during the 32nd Legislature's last session.

Below, the content of the letter:

"I write this letter to request your favorable consideration of Bill [32-0236](#), an Act expanding access to dental care by permitting dental therapists to practice under the general supervision of a dentist and only at the public health clinics. The measure is

supported by both commissioners of the department of Health and Human Services. This bill is a result of testimony received from citizens during a health committee town hall meeting in August 2017. At that time residents highlighted their frustration with the limited services at the clinics and the long wait to see a dentist. The director of dentistry of the Frederiksted clinic explained that the needs far exceed the resources and that there were 25,600 people in St. Croix alone who need dental care but may never receive it.

"Following the town hall meeting two other dentists employed at the clinic resigned. After researching how other jurisdictions have tackled this problem, we found multiple convincing and reliable studies conducted by both the Pew Research Center and the Kellogg Foundation. These studies revealed the benefits of dental therapists and how these mid-level professionals (similar to physician assistants) are helping to bridge the gap in dental services particularly in rural areas. Dental therapists have been used for centuries in countries like New Zealand and Australia. Most recently, states across the country are expanding dental services to the poor and uninsured and passed legislation allowing dental therapists to perform limited but important procedures. These professionals are college educated and must complete several hundred hours of training under the direct supervision of a dentist before they are allowed to perform within their limited scope.

"In particular, dental therapists are able to see young children who present with caries as well as adults who require fillings and other basic procedures. Dental therapists are trained extensively in specific procedures and may only practice under a collaborative agreement with a licensed dentist. Dental therapists are also required to be licensed and to complete continuing education courses. Because this bill only allows dental therapist to function at the clinics, it does not compete with private dentists. In fact, according to testimony offered by DHS, dental therapists will help the territory access and fully utilize the more than \$100m of unmet Medicaid funds. It is worth noting that DHS has been unable to expend these funds because private dentists do not accept MAP. Since dental therapists earn salaries lower than dentists, the clinics will be able to ramp up services and finally address the waiting list.

"The bill on your desk is poised to bring much needed relief to residents who seek dental care at the public health clinics. I am enclosing the DVD of the hearing which also includes a clip of the town hall meeting as well as the testimony offered by the Frederiksted clinic. It is my sincere hope that you recognize the need to expand access to oral care for the most vulnerable in our community. I am also enclosing testimony received during the last hearing and additional information regarding the benefits of dental therapists and data highlighting the lack of access in the territory."