

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Bryan Proposes Bill Giving Dept. of Health Regulatory Authority Over all Emergency Services, Including Private Operations

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Ernice Gilbert **October 30, 2019**



Governor Albert Bryan on Friday submitted two pieces of legislation that Government House said would dramatically overhaul emergency medical services in the territory if implemented. One bill seeks to merge the VI Fire Service with the Dept. of Health's Emergency Medical Services, while the other bill would create a system that Government House contends is more efficient and responsive to the emergency needs of residents and visitors to the Virgin Islands.

It appears the administration decided that it needed legislation to merge the D.O.H.'s EMS with the VI Fire Service. Throughout the year, Government House has promoted the merger -- which saw [great resistance](#) when introduced during the Mapp administration -- as [a better way forward](#) for the territory relative to emergency response. In July, the administration outlined its plans, with Government House stating that an integration project team, led by the Office of the Governor and spearheaded by the governor's public policy advisor, Marise James, had convened a meeting on July 19 to work on key components of the integration plan. More on the merger later.

The other measure, called the Virgin Islands Emergency Medical Services System Act, would create the first-ever Emergency Medical Services System and give the Virgin Islands Department of Health regulatory authority over all out-of-hospital emergency medical services providers in the territory to ensure those services are available and accessible to everyone, Government House said.

"The VIEMSS Act establishes an Emergency Medical Services System in the Virgin Islands Code and allows for the Department of Health to regulate out-of-hospital emergency medical services, to advance the quality of care and increase the amount of available care providers," Mr. Bryan wrote in his submittal letter to Senate President Novelle Francis Jr. "This bill, for the first time, gives the D.O.H. the legal foundation to regulate E.M.S. in the territory whether it is provided by fire service, rescue squad, a private entity or a nonprofit organization."

According to Government House, emergency medical services providers in the Virgin Islands currently operate without oversight. The proposed legislation calls for D.O.H. to establish a board which would be responsible for regulating ambulatory services and emergency medical care, for setting educational requirements and permitted practices, for licensing persons and organizations providing this service, and for developing a system that encourages providers to deliver the highest degree of care, the administration said.

Relative to the merger of VIFS and EMS, called the Virgin Islands Fire and Emergency Medical Services Act (VIFEMS), Mr. Bryan wrote in his letter that the bill would integrate "Fire and EMS as an efficient use of emergency resources and recognizes the need for firefighters throughout the territory to provide prompt fire prevention services as well as emergency medical services." With the services combined, Mr. Bryan sees a decrease in the response times to emergencies and an enhancement of "the capability and capacity of providing emergency and basic and advanced life support services to all individuals in the U.S. Virgin Islands."

In preparation for the merger of Fire Service and EMS, between September and October of this year, more than 50 VI firefighters took an emergency responder course, Government House said.

Mr. Bryan added that the merger is not a unique arrangement. Similar structures exist across the United States as communities seek to address the increasing need for out-of-hospital emergency medical services. According to the U.S. National Highway Safety Administration, fire services are the largest providers of EMS in the United States, Government House noted.

The administration said it has been working for several months to ensure a seamless transformation of D.O.H. and VI Fires Services into an integrated and regulated emergency medical services system. Earlier this year, Mr. Bryan named Ms. James to lead the task force on this effort. The task force included representatives from D.O.H., Fire Services, the Office of the Governor, Division of Personnel and the Office of Collective Bargaining, Government House said.

The territory's leader has said the initiative is necessary to promote the health, safety, and welfare of the residents of the territory and that reducing response time to medical emergencies is a critical objective of this integration.