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Widely Supported Virgin Islands Inclusion in Nurse Licensure Compact To Aide Recruitment Process of Nurses Passes Committee

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Kyle Murphy **August 17, 2021**

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The issue of staffing shortages of nurses in the Virgin Islands is no secret and on Tuesday the committee on Health, Hospitals and Human Services forwarded a bill to the Rules and Judiciary committee to aide recruitment efforts to bring qualified nurses into the territory that would establish the Nurse Licensure Compact to create a multistate nursing license in the Virgin Islands.

Bill Sponsor of BN-34-0040, Senator Kurt Vialet, said that this bill if passed it “would allow nurses in the Virgin Islands to have a reciprocity agreement with some 38 states and one territory. That literally means the licensure of those individuals from those 38 states who want to relocate to the Virgin Islands would

become a way simpler process.” In addition, nurses in the Virgin Islands would also be able to work in one of the 38 states and territory that are in the Nurse Licensure Compact.

“This reciprocity agreement would definitely allow the process of us to be able to attract healthcare professionals to the Virgin Islands a lot easier, it would also literally increase opportunities for our individuals who are local nurses here who might want to be apart of that multi state licensure and be able to relocate...We need to open our minds and we to look at every single opportunity that we have to increase healthcare in the Virgin Islands and some of the decisions are not going to be comfortable but I think they are decision that we don’t have any choice but to make if we are going to be able to take care of our population. The current situation at these hospitals are dire” said Mr. Violet.

While explaining the need for the legislation, Mr. Violet said “we must look at what is going on in health care right now, there is a crisis in healthcare when it comes to nursing, there is a very,very,very serious crisis as a direct result of us fighting this delta variant, and the Virgin Islands is a part of that crisis. Where we do not have sufficient R.N.s or boots on the ground to be able to make sure that our hospitals have 24/7 service.”

He acknowledged the complaints from local nurses about Pafford Medical Service in the territory but said “the truth of the matter is that all across the nations that they are hiring these firms to supplement hospitals because of lack of adequate staffing.” He made mention of a post by a nurse in the territory who felt “totally burnt” after completing a 17-hour shift. According to Mr. Violet the post said “while there are a lot of complaints from travelers, they are needed to keep these units going.”

The bill originally passed the committee and the Rules and Judiciary and made it to a legislative session but was sent back to committee “because we wanted to allow from additional testimony and it was sent back...while we continue to do stakeholder engagement and have a discussion regarding that” according to committee chairman Senator Novelle Francis. He added “all along the crisis continued to manifest.”

The bill was supported by Juan F. Luis Hospital, Schneider Regional Medical Center, the Department of Health , Virgin Islands Board of Nurse Licensure, National Council of State Boards of Nursing, and the Virgin Islands Board of Nurse Licensure.

Dyma Williams, Interim C.E.O. of J.F.L, said in her testimony “in addition to recruiting, this bill may also result in nurses choosing to leave the Virgin Islands. As such, retention of our hard working nurses that are already here must be addressed.” Her suggestion was for the Legislature's “consideration of financial incentives for retention of our current nurses on staff, including competitive salaries for all nursing disciplines, a viable employee benefits package, and an attractive retirement package.”

During her closing statement said Ms. Williams said “the Nurse Licensure Compact allows J.F.L. to be more agile and efficient in our recruitment and retention efforts, interested nurses often cite the timelessness of the length of time to process their license as a reason that they lose interest in employment in our territory. Streamlining the licensing process only enhances our nursing staff capacities that allows us to enhance quality healthcare at J.F.L.”

Both she and Luis Amaro, Interim C.E.O. of SRMC spoke to the fact that the passage of this bill would reduce the wait-time to secure licensed nurses to practice in the territory

Senator Franklin Johnson sought to learn if wages were competitive enough in the Virgin Islands to attract outside nurses. Commissioner of Health Justa Encarnacion responded “no, right now we are not as competitive as we should be but what I wanted to say and speak to is that the Governor has actually spoken with our bargaining units.. The Chief negotiator, let me just say and she is actually working with all of the union as well as the representatives to ensure that we increase the level of pay specific to the various entities... we are hoping to correct that as soon as possible from an administration standpoint.”

Ms. Encarnacion added later Governor Bryan is setting a meeting with both Ms. Williams and Mr. Amaro “to discuss compensation for the clinical staff... to compete with the other states as well because they are doing it and we need to figure out how we are going to compensate our nursing staff and our clinical staff here in the territory.

In a letter written to Senator Novelle Francis, Rebecca Fotsch, director of State Advocacy & Legislative Affairs for the National Council of State Boards of Nursing said “recently, nurses in the Virgin Islands were surveyed to determine their level of support for the NLC. According to the survey results, 96% of those surveyed support the U.S. Virgin Islands joining the NLC and 95% of those surveyed would obtain a multistate license if they were able.”

Earlier in the hearing it was made known that grant funding is available for the implementation of the Nurse Licensure Compact and Senator Carla Joseph inquired about the type of funding that is usually obtained by each state or territory. Ms. Fotsch explained “it depends on each state or territory, what we ask is that the boards of the state or territory give us an itemized list with the cost and our board of directors then approves that. We have never had an instance where we did not approve any expenditure for a state...if something is needed we are here to fund.”

Ms. Fotsch said that the grant request can cover items such as temporary workers to help with the implementation process and upgrades to I.T. systems.

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