

logo not found or type unknown

Bill Updating Educational Requirements for Counseling Moves Forward; Measure to Put Election Records Online Fails Again

Government / **Published On February 11, 2022 02:18 AM /**

Linda Straker **February 11, 2022**

Image not found or type unknown



A bill updating licensure requirements for professional counseling while approving fines for those with unlicensed operations has received the approval of the Committee on Rules and Judiciary.

Sponsored by Senator Marvin Blyden, Bill No. 34-0190 also updates and strengthens educational requirements for professional counselors, substance abuse counselors, and family and marriage therapists.

“It facilitates the development of approved supervisors thus eliminating the bottleneck that has created a shortage of providers and preventative local qualify professionals from engaging in a profession in the territory,” Mr. Blyden told the committee during a Thursday hearing.

“It strengthens provisions or prohibits and punishes the employment of unlicensed counselors. It requires criminal background checks for all applicants for licensure. It increases the type of continuing education unit as a condition of licensing renewal,” Mr. Blyden said.

He explained that under the current structure, the roadblocks of achieving licensure are such that nearly all licensed counselors in the territory achieve their licensure in other jurisdictions. “This measure will create a path for licensure for more providers and approved supervisors in the territory while strengthening educational requirements and the regulation of the profession,” he said while pointing out that Virgin Islanders are culturally different from mainland U.S. citizens.

Described by Nathalie Hodge, assistant commissioner at the Department of Licensing and Consumer Affairs as a bill that is strengthening the licensure requirements as a layer of protection for the public, she said that the increase of fines will go a long way in deterring unscrupulous individuals from engaging in professional counseling services without being licensed.

Under the penalty section of the legislation, it says that any person who knowingly employs a person who holds himself out to be a licensed professional counselor to practice in the USVI without a valid license, shall be fined not less than \$1,000, or not more than \$2,500 for each offense if convicted.

In her testimony, Dr. Vincentia Paul-Constantin, chairperson of the Virgin Islands Board of Licensed Counselors and Examiners acknowledged that there is a shortage of behavioral health providers in the territory and the path to licensure has been laborious.

“To date, there are over a dozen licensed professional counselors, marriage & family therapists, and substance abuse counselors in the territory. Many of these individuals have had to obtain some or all their education, experience, or professional licensure on the mainland...Pursuing licensure after obtaining a master’s degree is still elusive particularly for the population that the original bill was intended to assist,” she said.

“The proposed amendments will increase the ability for providers to meet the unique social, cultural, and linguistic needs of their clients, and increasing cultural awareness — all of which are linked to more positive health outcomes,” she said while informing the committee that cultural tradition plays a role when it comes to those who are working as counselors and those who are receiving counseling.

“The proposed amendments provide for a more robust understanding of the profession and scope of practice, establishing educational and experiential criteria that is commensurate with national standards and forging a clearer path towards licensure through the formation of associate professional license categories,” she told the committee.

The committee also approved bill 34-0147, legislation that would make it illegal for education administrators to discriminate against people because of their hair texture. The Act amends V.I. Code relating to discrimination on account of race to include discrimination on the basis of hair texture, and it seeks to enact “The Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair Act”, or “The Virgin Islands Crown Act of 2021.” The bill had received [a favorable vote](#) in the Committee on Education and Workforce Development in November. It now heads to the Committee of the Whole.

However, Bill No. 34-0149, an Act amending Virgin Islands Code Title 18, Chapter 3, Section 53 updating the record-keeping practices of the Board of Elections to ensure all official records relating to elections are accessible to the public through the use of technology and cloud-based services, was placed on hold for the third time.

