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Investigation Into Sen. Steven Payne's Alleged Sexual Harassment Matter Escalated to Senate Ethics Committee

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Senator Steven Payne Sr. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

The sexual harassment allegation brought against Senator Steven Payne Sr. by one of his employees in the Senate has been escalated to the Senate Committee on Ethical Conduct, the Consortium can confirm, a development indicating that the initial investigatory team that comprised of Senate Vice President Novelle Francis and the executive director of the Legislature, found enough probable cause to initiate a wider probe.

Members of the Senate Committee on Ethical Conduct received the document Wednesday, which was forwarded from the Office of Senate President Donna Frett-Gregory to the five members, said

people with intimate knowledge of the matter. The committee includes Sen. Milton Potter, who serves as the committee's chairman, Sen. Kenneth Gittens, who serves as vice chairman, and Sens. Kurt Vialet, Carla Joseph, and Dwayne DeGraff.

Mr. Payne is now facing multiple sexual harassment allegations, both of which have been reported on by the Consortium. The first, which we [reported on April 7](#), involves an allegation made against Mr. Payne by one of his employees during a work trip to St. Croix. Mr. Payne, an at-large senator, represents St. John. According to people familiar with the matter, the female employee, who is believed to be in her early 20s, allegedly realized that her luggage was missing when they arrived to a hotel they were staying in and made inquiries with other employees of Mr. Payne's office. Still unable to find the luggage, she allegedly approached Mr. Payne outside his hotel room to ask whether he knew what happened to the luggage. Mr. Payne allegedly had the luggage, and it was then that he allegedly invited the employee to stay in his room, an alleged action the employee is said to have refused.

Mr. Payne dismissed the allegations when asked by the Consortium on March 23 about the complaint. Denying the allegations, he said, "What happen is, it's election time, man. Election time," an apparent reference to bad actors attempting to derail his reelection bid.

The employee has since retained legal counsel, the Consortium has learned.

The other matter, which was [reported by the Consortium on April 11](#), involves a woman from St. John who said she was sexually harassed by Mr. Payne on a beach in 2005, where the senator allegedly ripped her underwear off.

The alleged victim, Chezni Jones, posted about the incident [on Facebook in 2018](#) but while she received encouraging words from commenters, the media did not pick up her story at the time.

"We were in St. John. Anybody who's been to St. John knows it's 3/4 National Park — that means nothing but trees. So I was afraid... I didn't know whether or not this man was looking at me to say 'Well, you know what? If I think she's going to say something, I might have to take care of this now to save my career.' I didn't know if he was going to do something and drag my body somewhere deep in the woods - I didn't know. This is a man who's what, 6'2", 6'3"? And I'm 5'5", and at the time I only weighed 125 pounds...I'm afraid of him. He's bigger than me, and he has a weapon," Jones told the Consortium in a series of exclusive interviews.

Mr. Payne did not respond to a request for comment regarding the recently-resurfaced allegations made by Ms. Jones in 2018.

V.I. Attorney General Denise George, who spoke earlier this month at the V.I. Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Council (DVSAC) Sexual Assault Awareness Month press conference, refrained from commenting on the matter, citing a V.I. Dept. of Justice policy aimed at preserving the integrity of a possible investigation. "Investigations are confidential in nature, and I will not breach the confidentiality of the investigation process by commenting whether or not there exists an investigation," Ms. George said.

St. Croix Administrator and former Senator Samuel Sanes, also present at the DVSAC press conference and spoke on behalf of the Bryan administration, said the administration's response was in line with the attorney general's. "At this time the attorney speaks for the administration," he said.