

logo not found or type unknown

14 Senators Sign Letter Calling For Payne's Resignation: 'I'm Prepared to Do What's Necessary to Protect the Integrity of the Institution,' Senate President Says

Investigations / **Published On May 27, 2022 02:38 AM /**

Ernice Gilbert **May 27, 2022**

Image not found or type unknown



Senators who make up the 34th Legislature, exclusive Sen. Steven Payne.

In what amounts to be the strongest signal yet to Senator Steven Payne, fourteen of the 15-member 34th Legislature have signed a letter calling for his resignation in wake of the serious allegations made against the senator, who now stands accused by a 3rd woman of inappropriate and potentially criminal behavior toward her when she was a minor and Mr. Payne her guardian.

The letter comes on the heels of statements from the V.I. Democratic Party, [which demanded](#) that the senator step down or be removed, and Governor Albert Bryan, who called on the V.I. Dept. of Justice [to launch an investigation](#) into the allegations, calling them "serious and disturbing."

"This letter is regarding the allegations published against you in today's edition of the V.I. Consortium," wrote lawmakers in the [collective letter](#) on Thursday. "You are entitled to due process and the presumption of innocence in all allegations. This presumption includes the unrelated matter currently being considered by the Committee on Ethical Conduct in which the Legislature has jurisdiction only. However, today's allegations are extremely serious and may result in criminal investigations considering the accuser was allegedly a minor at the time of the allegations."

In the letter, senators pointed out that the latest allegations against Mr. Payne were from a third alleged victim. They also highlighted as important the need to protect the Legislature as an institution. "As you know, this is the third published allegation of inappropriate conduct made against you by a female. Two of the allegations allegedly occurred prior to the your legislative tenure. The allegations made public today do not reflect well on you as a senator and the Legislature as an institution. Consequently, we strongly urge you to immediately resign as a Senator at-Large to protect the integrity of the institution in which you serve, the constituents to whom you represent, and to handle the extremely serious allegations published against you today.

"It is our responsibility as senators to protect the institution in which we serve. The Legislature of the Virgin Islands is an institution that existed long before your tenure and will continue to exist long after we serve."

Asked by the Consortium what would happen if the senator decides not to resign, Senate President Donna Frett-Gregory said she's prepared to do what it takes to protect the Legislature. "I'm prepared to do what's necessary to protect the integrity of the institution, but we must give the senator an opportunity to make his decision," she said.

Thursday's actions follow exclusive reporting by Consortium journalists on allegations of inappropriate sexual behavior by Mr. Payne. The first story, published on April 7, reported on an investigation [launched by the 34th Legislature](#) after the senator was accused of sexual harassment by a young, female employee. That matter is currently being probed by [the Senate Committee on Ethical Conduct](#).

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 second matter, [reported on by the Consortium on April 11](#), involved 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.

Relative the latest matter, the Consortium [on Wednesday](#) published excerpts of an exclusive interview with Steffi Emilien, a 21-year old Saint Lucian woman who says that she was sent to the USVI to live as a child, and enrolled in the Julius E Sprauve School, to which Payne was assigned when he was a VIPD officer. She first met Payne when she joined the V.I. Avengerz, the band he co-managed. Emilien said that Payne first offered her protection as a father figure shortly after her living conditions deteriorated, but used that access to behave inappropriately towards her on at least three occasions. She said that first, Payne kissed her on the mouth in a band room on St. John, and that following her relocation to Florida in the aftermath of the 2017 hurricane, he approached her twice more — first requesting a naked massage followed by a shower when they were in a hotel room on the way to Universal Studios, and then confronting her with a sex toy while they were in his his sister's Jacksonville residence.

Before and since the reporting was published, Consortium journalists have not been able to reach Senator Payne despite numerous attempts to contact him directly, his office, and his chief of staff.