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Bill Seeking to Fund Refurbishing of Building to Provide Services for the Homeless Held in Committee Over Ownership of Building, Other Concerns

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Karen Dickenson, founder and president of the Collective Collaboration. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

A bill that sought to use government funds to purchase a building to provide services for the homeless and mentally ill on St. Croix, in what was described as a public-private relationship, was held in committee following concerns about the measure.

Bill No. 34-0176 is an Act appropriating \$325,000 from the Community Facility Trust Fund to the General Fund for the purpose of supporting the refurbishment of a building located at No. 33 Company Street, Christiansted. The building would be used by the Collective Collaboration, Inc.,

an adult mental health and homelessness program established in 2020.

But the building would not be owned by the Government of the Virgin Islands and some lawmakers saw that as a problem. Deputy Property and Procurement Commissioner Vincent Richards, said the government should own the building and then lease it to the Collective Collaboration.

“If any funds from this appropriation would be earmarked for the acquisition of property, the government would need to acquire the property itself and hold title to the property. This process requires three appraisals, the governor’s and Legislature’s approval,” Mr. Richards said while explaining that leasing the property to the Collective Collaboration would be in line with other plans of the government to lease property to nonprofit organizations.

Senator Donna Frett-Gregory were among lawmakers who, while supporting the efforts of the Collective Collaboration, voiced concern with the measure. "I am in full support of Collective Collaboration and the work they do," she said. "However, the information and ask that came before the committee was unclear and remained unclear throughout the discussion. The Department of Property and Procurement gave their support but also strongly recommend that the GVI purchase the building and turn lease it to the nonprofit even if it's only for a few dollars per year, that's what I will support. And if we need to appropriate funding for the up fitting I'm there because of the service the entity provides to our community. Let's just do it right the first time."

The bill was ultimately held in committee, with Senators Frett-Gregory, Janelle Sarauw, Dwayne DeGraff and Marvin Blyden voting to hold it. Senator Javan James voted in favor while Senators Samuel Carrion and Kurt Vialet abstained.

During the hearing, Karen Dickenson, founder and president of the Collective Collaboration, said that mental health care and homelessness in the territory have reached crisis levels and that there is a lack of resources to address the problem. She said the government has not provided the resources to fight the growing issue.

“The plight of homeless and mental health in a small community as such should not be at this crisis level," Ms. Dickenson said. "We are in crisis and no one seems to care. The necessary resources to address the problem are nowhere in sight. Politicians continue to use my family as the fundamental of their campaign, and after election, they become the visible invisible."

Ms. Dickenson, visibly emotional, said the Collective Collaboration continues to do its part in impacting the community and empowering individuals. "My family is no different than yours, they are not requesting a lot. A simple meal, a safe place to rest, and people to care for and provide support. This is not an easy job, it is not. However, it is a job I love as these are my family. I ask everyone here who has a heart to lend your support to this bill." She said the measure's approval would allow for many to have a safe space at night "just like you and I in your family."

Mr. Francis, the bill sponsor, [in a post of Facebook](#) following the hearing stated, "Sometimes all that's keeping people from being out on the streets is one paycheck. Sometimes it's mental illness. Sometimes it's just bad luck. The reality is that the only difference between someone who is homeless and you, is that you have the stability of knowing where you are going to sleep every night and that you will be safe. That is the only difference. Our homeless are people, too, and I will continue to advocate on their behalf."