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Licensure Board Struggles With Licensing as USVI Continues to Face Nurse Shortages

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The extended period of time it takes to license nurses in the U.S. Virgin Islands is dampening the efforts of the territory to respond to the healthcare needs of its people.

Law makers on the Committee on Finance heard on Thursday that there is a “great need for LPNs to cover nursing homes” with little to no License Practical Nurses (LPN) available on the islands.

According to the Board of Nurse Licensure (BNL), 30 students graduated from the University of the Virgin Islands; 30 Nursing Assistants from Combined Nursing Assistant Programs and only three Practical Nurses from Raphael O. Wheatley Skill Center in 2022.

For that same year, the Board of Nurse Licensure (BNL) said it issued a total of 49 initial licenses and completed a total of 800 Registered Nurses (RN) renewals.

However, the contract it once had with the nurse testing center - Pearson VUE is null and void and conversations with Credentia — a new testing agency — began in April but no agreement has yet been reached to help increase the nursing staff.

Tanicia Penn, RN, chairperson of the Virgin Islands Board of Nurse Licensure told legislators during the budget hearing that Pearson VUE will now only deal with testing registered nurses.

The change of the administering agency caused a delay in registering dozens of nurses.

“We had to come and make a new contract and that contract, we had been trying to get it executed since about April and we are glad to say today, based on the last information received, it’s now at Property and Procurement and that’s what caused that big delay in testing for the CNAs,” explained Ms. Penn.

The board has recommended that these nurses take a review before sitting the National Council Licensure Examination (NCLEX) and the National Nurse Aide Assessment Program (NNAAP) Exam that would certify them to work legally.

Penn said that the territory also lacked nursing assistant schools that would allow CNAs to complete their training. “We actually approved three of them last year so that’s why we had the increase in the numbers. So, currently what we’re being plagued with is we do not have any license practical nurse especially on the island of St Croix.”

In addition, BNL recorded a \$125,000 loss because it continuously had to issue temporary permits to nurses, many of them traveling professionals, during the Covid-19 pandemic. Overall, the licensure said it issued more than 1,101 temporary permits to nurses.

Dr. Brittany Dawson, vice chair on the Board of Nurse Licensure explained that the board was never consulted on the executive order which resulted in a 30-day reprocessing time for the renewal of permits. This placed a “large amount of strain” on the board’s staff, she added.

“In regards to the executive order we were also never consulted on that or the process when the Virgin Islands Code Nurse Practice Act would have allotted us the time and space to grant the 90-day permits and allow us to function at a higher capacity,” she explained.

During testimony it was revealed that the board has 13 pending disciplinary action cases from 2012-2022 that include violation of Federal or State statutes regulation of rules, license revocation, fraud, failure to meet Licensing Board Reporting Requirement and failure to disclose.

To deal with these infractions, BNL has requested additional funds from the government to create a compliance unit. But this unit must be able to complete a national background check based on the Nurse Licensure Compact law which the Boards of Nursing oversees.

These checks however require authorization from the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) which also presents challenges with delays.

“Currently in the Virgin Islands we are pending a response from the FBI,” Penn said, noting that the board met with the compact last week who shared that the waiting process could take up to a year or more on average.

“Once that launches the National Council on Nursing has stated on average implementation of the compact will take anywhere from six months to a year,” she noted.

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