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Bill to Secure More Support For Seniors and Disabled During Times of Disaster Wins Committee Approval

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Legislation that can improve the chances of survival for residents living with special needs and disabilities in the U.S Virgin Islands, is headed to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary after seven senators voted in favor of Bill No. 34-0265 on Monday afternoon.

The amendment to Title 23 of the Virgin Islands Code, adds a subchapter to chapter 10 that establishes the Office of Disability Integration within the Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency (VITEMA) which would be responsible for equitable dissemination of information and other resources during disaster periods.

That office would be responsible for ensuring that there is equal access to disaster response and preparedness resources for people who a differently abled and who are currently marginalized

because of the lack of expertise to attend to their physical, psychosocial and cognitive disabilities.

A total amount of \$125,000 has been allocated to fund the office and to place a staff member in each district who will work directly with the Planning and Preparedness Division under VITEMA.

However, based on the needs outline, both senators and invited the testifiers were concerned that the organization was being underfunded.

“I can’t emphasize enough that’s a recipe for disaster. Do not underfund these positions and then it doesn’t work; we need the resources,” insisted Barbara Peterson, acting director of VITEMA during the Monday hearing in the Committee on Homeland Security, Justice and Public Safety.

At the beginning of 2022, Ms. Peterson said disability integration was identified as one of 19 focus area initiatives for the territory by VITEMA, the Office of the ADA Coordinator, the Department of Homeland Security, the Government House Joint Information Center, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Therefore, once established, the office will begin to address a number of shortcomings with the current hurricane planning strategy and work to remedy the following:

- The lack of outreach to residents with mobility disabilities to register with VITRAN ahead of hurricane season for transportation to and from shelters
- The lack of delivery options for people with limited mobility and challenges getting to points of distribution, and getting those commodities back home
- Need for manpower in standing up and managing pet shelters to making sure persons have access to taking care of their pets, be walking, feeding, and clean-up
- Need to secure American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters for all public facing activities in preparation and response, whether via social media or public broadcasting
- Ensuring individuals in shelters, especially those who are deaf, have communication access to notifications being made to all at the shelter

In addition, the office will establish a database to keep track of the number of disabled people living in the territory.

Already, the ADA has implemented a RapidSOS, an emergency response data platform that securely links data to 911 and first responders, to locate people who reach out for help.

In January 2023, Text to 911, the ability to send a text message to reach 911 emergency call receivers from your mobile phone or device, will also be available.

ADA Coordinator Julien Henley said studies conducted by his office show that most flood plain areas have a high number of seniors and people with disabilities.

He said currently this vulnerable group of people have no coordinated way of knowing and learning best practices during a disaster.

“Having this body put together with the ADA coordinator actually makes it even stronger because we would then not only look at first response that the Fire Department might do but what are they missing,” he said.

Part of the solution is to find qualified ASL interpreters that can communicate this information for those who need it. It is a challenge that Mr. Henley said the territory is likely to continue to have.

“So right now, those are programs that I’m working with throughout the territory to make sure we have different ways to communicate with the vulnerable population in formats that met each disability, and ASL just happens to be the one that happens to be in the top,” he explained.

In addition, he addressed the need to formalize a program in the future that would allow the disabled population to receive sustainable power generation during disasters which could save lives.

The bill was proposed by Senators Marvin A. Blyden, Genevieve R. Whitaker and Angel L. Bolques, Jr. but was the brainchild of former senator Alison Degazon.

Mr. Blyden said the final bill is as a result of nearly two years of collaboration with various government agencies and social organizations.

For now, the agencies are unaware of the real count of disabled people living on the island and so could not concretely say how many people the new office would benefit.

If the measure makes it through the Senate and is signed into law by the governor, it would be implemented within 30 days of its approval. The integration is anticipated to happen in 90 days, providing that the manpower required can be hired within that time.