

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Plaskett Amendments in U.S. Defense Bill Include Measures Aimed at Strengthening U.S. Posture in Caribbean

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Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett on Thursday announced that amendments she proposed as part of the National Defense Authorization Act measure have passed the U.S. House of Representatives and include important items beneficial to the territory and America's defense posture in the Caribbean.

The amendments, which include a study and report, must feature an assessment of the need to increase capabilities regarding counter-drug and counter-trafficking operations; combating transnational criminal organizations; disaster preparedness and response;

and countering "China and Russia's malign influences in the Caribbean region," Ms. Plaskett said.

The measures also include amendments that benefit servicemen and women in the U.S. Virgin Islands as well as on the mainland.

The NDAA authorizes appropriations each year for the U.S. Dept. of Defense's military activities around the world.

"This bill represents months of hard work and compromises with colleagues on both sides of the aisle and in both chambers of Congress," Ms. Plaskett said.

The 2023 draft legislation of the NDAA also advanced other key national security priorities specific to the Virgin Islands, including the Water Resources Development Act of 2022 which authorizes a \$1.6 million project to improve wastewater infrastructure in the territory. The project will be carried out by the V.I. Waste Management Authority.

And it includes a demonstration program for the Virgin Islands coastal waters by the Army Corps of Engineers to detect, prevent, treat, and eliminate harmful algal blooms such as sargassum.

Additionally, provisions have been made to increase the pay of service members by 4.6 percent and provides short-term mental health resources to disaster victims.

The changes also include the following:

- Requires the Veterans Affairs Department to establish the Advisory Committee on United States Outlying Areas to provide advice and guidance to the VA on matters relating to veterans residing in U.S. territories, including the Virgin Islands. Among other duties, the committee would also advise the VA on how to improve its programs and services to better serve veterans living in the territories.
- Requires FEMA to waive repayment requirements for those who received disaster aid because of FEMA error, as long as no fraud was involved
- Reauthorizes the Coral Reef Conservation program and updates and reauthorizes several National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Ocean mapping programs. It also creates a program to improve the collection and analysis of data to measure the value and impact of industries related to water-based economies in the United States.
- Establishes the Ron Dellums Memorial Fellowship to expand minority participation in STEM fields in the Department of Defense.
- Authorizes \$131.7 million for HBCUs and Minority Serving Institutions to help expand research efforts at HBCUs and MSIs.
- Modifies the selection process for Port Infrastructure Development Program assistance to allow the Secretary of Transportation to consider, for a noncontiguous State or territory: o the geographic isolation of the State or territory to the economic dependence of the State or territory on the proposed project.

The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023 must now be taken up and passed by the Senate before it gets to the president's desk. Ms. Plaskett believes that this year's NDAA reflects legislators' "enduring belief that people are the heart of

America's defense."

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