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Vialet Introduces Bill to Raise Minimum Wage of Gov't Employees From \$13 to \$15 Per Hour

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Senator Kurt Vialet has introduced legislation that would raise the minimum wage of government employees from \$13 an hour to \$15 an hour, moving their annual total from \$27,040 to \$32,000.

The senator told the Consortium Wednesday that the measure is one of the last significant bills he plans on moving forward ahead of his exit from the Senate in January.

The raise would cover 971 employees and cost the government \$4.5 million annually, according Jose George, post auditor of the Legislature of the Virgin Islands. The current minimum wage for private sector employees in the USVI, which Mr. Vialet's measure does not address, is \$10.50 per hour.

"With inflation and the cost of everything it's hard for a living wage," Mr. Vialet said, referring to the current \$27,040 annual income of some government employees. "A lot of these employees, for them it's having the ability to survive when everything is on the rise — from commodities to other goods — everything around us."

The veteran lawmaker cited the Bureau of Economic Research, now an arm of the Office of the Governor, which recently provided data showing that the cost of living in the U.S. Virgin Islands is up 7.3 percent overall, while the cost of food rose by 20.7 percent between January 2020 to January 2021.

Adding to the cost of living is the cost of energy in the territory, where residential customers pay 43 cents per kilowatt hour for electricity, "more than three times higher than the U.S. average power price of 14 cents," according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration.

"Businesses are able to pass on the cost of inflation to the consumer, however, the labor force continues to struggle to maintain a decent quality of life while adjusting to the fluctuations in the marketplace," Mr. Vialet said.

The bill will be special ordered to the Senate on Dec. 29th during what is expected to be an all-day session before 2022 ends.