

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Bill to Make Juneteenth Official Holiday in USVI Passes Committee on Gov't Operations

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Elesha George **March 01, 2023**



June 23, 2018; Children on a float wave to the crowd during the annual Juneteenth parade in Center City Philadelphia, PA. By. GETTY IMAGES

Senators on the Committee on Government Operations spent the last day of Black History Month debating whether to include June 19th as a legally paid holiday in the territory and to amend the VI Code to reflect changes that had been made by the [federal government in the United States in 2021](#).

Bill No. 35-009, sponsored by Senator Marvin A. Blyden and co-sponsored by senators Ray Fonseca and Angel Bolques, would, if passed, ensure that government workers are

paid overtime and holiday pay on that day.

Currently, to recognize Juneteenth, the governor must grant administrative leave each year in order for government employees to receive the day off. "As a result, government employees who must work on Juneteenth cannot be paid overtime or holiday leave as they are for other federal and local holidays," Mr. Blyden noted.

"After decades of efforts by activists and progressive lawmakers, federal law was changed to make Juneteenth a national holiday. However, no corresponding change in local law has been made to add Juneteenth to the list of local holidays," Mr. Blyden said.

June 19th, commonly referred to as Juneteenth in America, honors the end of slavery in the United States and is considered the longest-running African American holiday. On June 17th, 2021, President Joe Biden declared Juneteenth National Independence Day as a U.S. federal holiday.

Juneteenth, also called Jubilee Day, Emancipation Day and Freedom Day, commemorates the day on June 19th 1865 when federal troops arrived in Galveston, Texas to take control of the state and to ensure that all enslaved people were freed. Black people in Texas were still treated as enslaved until the troops' arrival two and a half years after the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation.

Juneteenth has been celebrated by black people in Texas for 156 years and is now celebrated by African Americans all over the United States.

"It is only fitting that as the first jurisdiction to adopt Martin Luther King Day as an official holiday, that we continue in this tradition by officially recognizing Juneteenth as a traditional and territorial holiday here in the Virgin Islands," remarked Mr. Blyden.

"My argument in this matter is simple, under no circumstances in a jurisdiction predominantly populated by African American descendants should one national holiday honoring the emancipation of African people be accorded secondary status by our territorial law," he added.

Historian and former senator Myron D. Jackson appeared as a testifier on Tuesday. He said that the day would bring a greater sense of national pride for Virgin Islanders about their own struggles and freedoms and the role that they played in influencing the Emancipation Proclamation more than a century and a half ago.

Mr. Jackson said the bill could be enhanced to include a public education component. "The bill can be further advanced by making sure that the Department of Education includes in its curriculum the observance. The Office of the Governor or the Legislature can likewise include in its advocacy public education engagements on Juneteenth," Mr. Jackson said.

While Senators Carla Joseph and Javan James were concerned about adding another holiday to the calendar, they expressed hope that it would strengthen the need to further implement aspects of VI history in the school curriculum. Likewise, Senator Dwayne DeGraff pushed for the recognition of other locally important events.

After a unanimous vote in favor, the bill will now move to the next step of legislative consideration and possible assent. If ultimately passed by the governor, Juneteenth will

become the 14th official holiday in the U.S. Virgin Islands alongside cultural holidays like VI Emancipation Day, Independence Day, Martin Luther King Jr.'s Birthday, D. Hamilton Jackson Day (Liberty Day) and Columbus Day (Puerto Rico Friendship Day).

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