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Bill to Provide V.I. Driver's License and Identification Cards to Undocumented Immigrants Approved in Senate Committee

Government / **Published On March 16, 2023 05:48 AM /**

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Senator Samuel Carrion is the sponsore of Bill No. 35-0013, whose aim is to provide undocumented immigrants with a limited U.S. Virgin Islands driver's license and identification card. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

A bill that seeks to provide undocumented immigrants with a limited U.S. Virgin Islands driver's license and identification card was approved in the Senate Committee on Homeland Security, Justice, and Public Safety Wednesday, marking a major development for those living in the USVI without proper documentation.

The measure is also significant because the territory continues to see rising inflows of immigrants, many of them of Venezuelan descent.

Sponsored by Senator Samuel Carrion, the bill will be forwarded to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary where it is expected to also gain lawmakers' approval. Governor Albert Bryan is expected to sign the measure into law [based on Mr. Bryan's belief that the USVI needs immigrants](#) if it is to meet capacity to rebuild the territory following the devastating storms of 2017.

According to the bill ([No. 35-0013](#)), before an undocumented immigrant can be granted the driver's license or identification card, they must provide proof of residency in the USVI for at least 90 days. These identification cards may not be used for arrest, detention, or any other immigration enforcement action. Additionally, the driver's license or identification card "does not convey voting privileges and is not valid for any official federal purpose," according to language found in the bill. The bill stresses that these forms of identification are limited in nature, as they do not give undocumented individuals legal status nor do they other privileges provided by the federal government.

Mr. Carrion said that if signed into law, the measure would increase the number of licensed and insured driver's on the territory's roads.

"We are not just talking about granting licenses to those here undocumented, but also affording the opportunity to those on student and work visas or in some kind of immigration limbo that we have no control over locally," he said. "Whatever the case, those with an irregular immigration status will always be a part of our community, and we must be more pragmatic in terms of how we address this issue."

The legislation received steadfast support from a number of organizations in both the public and private sectors, among them the V.I. Police Department, the V.I. Justice Department, the V.I. Division of Banking & Insurance, the V.I. Bureau of Motor Vehicles, the V.I. Insurance Association, and representatives from various ethnic associations such as the St. Lucia, Dominica, Haiti, Venezuela, St. Vincent & Grenadines, Dominican Republic, and the Philippines Associations.

According to Mr. Carrion, similar legislation has already been enacted in Puerto Rico and 20 other jurisdictions to allow non-Real ID cards and licenses to be granted.

Statistics also show a decrease in vehicular crimes such as hit-and-runs in jurisdictions that have expanded license eligibility.

Jerome Pineda, a St. Croix teacher and Philippines native, testified that many teachers have to walk to work and have difficulty performing basic errands because they lack legal driving privileges. He said while their visas allow them to obtain temporary licenses, they don't often get the federal documentation necessary before the expiration of those licenses.

Senate Majority Leader Kenneth Gittens threw his support behind the measure, describing it as common sense legislation. "As a retired law enforcement officer, I believe extending this privilege will improve overall security and help law enforcement to better know who is on our roadways in the event of a traffic violation or even the commission of a crime," he said. "At least 18 states, Washington D.C. and Puerto Rico have already granted the opportunity to all those residing in their jurisdictions to obtain driver's licenses and identification cards."

Mr. Carrion said residents will still have to undergo the standard written and driving tests issued by the Bureau of Motor Vehicles before obtaining a driver's license.

