

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Senators Approve Bill Providing \$5,000 Lump Sum Payment to USVI Centenarians

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Senior citizens that live to 100 years old could receive \$1,000 towards their burial as part of a \$5000 grant, if a legislative amendment making its way through the Senate is signed into law.

On Tuesday, the Senate Committee on Budget, Appropriations and Finance voted in favor of [Bill No. 35-0054](#), which modifies the Centennial Living Treasures Award Program Fund. Currently, the commissioner of the Department of Human Services is authorized to award a grant of \$4,000 to a centenarian on their 100th birthday, and upon the centenarian's death, award a second payment of \$1,000 to the family towards their burial expenses.

The changes to the existing legislation will allow for those two payments to be rolled into one single \$5000 grant that will alleviate existing disbursement challenges being experienced by DHS, according to the measure's proponents.

“We acknowledge that there have been times where it has proved difficult to provide the additional \$1,000 to recipients due to prohibitive factors. In certain instances, it is a matter of timing. There have been times when DHS does not get notified in a timely manner to the passing of a recipient and is unable to present the additional \$1,000, or the recipient passed while off-island,” said DHS Commissioner Causey-Gomez in her submitted written testimony.

Monique Farrell, deputy director of the Office of Management and Budget, added that the amendment under consideration will reduce the cost of maintaining a system to track the birthdays and then subsequently the death of a centenarian, as well as the cost of processing the transactions necessary to issue a second payment.

“There is an additional unquantifiable cost, as well as the precious resource of time, which can be eliminated if the \$5,000 grant is awarded in a one-time lump sum payment to the centenarian. Further, awarding a lump sum grant reduces the potential for inadvertently missing the second payment and having a negative impact on the family of the centenarian, as well as on the reputation of the Government of the Virgin Islands,” she noted.

Since the bill passed in 2019, the legislature has set aside \$25,000 annually for the past three years beginning in 2020, totaling \$115,000. However, disbursements only began in fiscal year 2022, amounting to \$24,000.

“For FY 2023 the appropriation is \$40,000 and to date in this fiscal year there has been one disbursement of \$4,000,” Ms. Farrell said.

Since the unused funds currently do not roll over, in the 2024 budget, the Committee intends to correct the legislation to allow the money to remain in the account until it is expended for its purpose.

Additionally, the legislature will need to amend how the money is being appropriated. Committee chair Senator Donna Frett-Gregory stated that rather than appropriating the money to the Centennial Living Treasures Award Fund annually, the money has instead been funneled into the Dept of Human Services’ Miscellaneous Fund, which subsequently creates an issue with timely disbursement. Legislative change is required to properly appropriate those monies. “As simple as this may seem, this measure goes a long way,” remarked Ms. Frett-Gregory.

To qualify for the trust award, centenarians must have lived in the U.S. Virgin Islands for at least 30 years and must be a resident when they turn 100 years old.

All senators present voted in favor of the amendment but noted the absence of a representative of the Dept. of Human Services for whom they had questions.