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USVI Seniors Take the Senate Floor in Mock Session, Pleading for Better Elderly Care

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Natividad Osario, taking pointers from Senate President Novelle Francis, served as Senate president during the Senior Citizens Mock Session on Tuesday, May 23, 2023.
By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

In celebration of Older Americans Month, themed "Aging Unbound" for 2023, the 35th Legislature of the U.S. Virgin Islands conducted a mock session which featured senior citizens standing in as legislators and staffers to discuss a hypothetical bill focused on improving the circumstances for the aging populace.

The lively sitting featured passionate debate and all the features of a session in regular order, complete with points of information being raised, legislative amendments being offered, and

objections being filed — all while the whispered guidance of the elected senators who the seniors were representing could be heard in the background.

The heart of this session was the Bill 35-000AM, which advocated for modifications to title 19 of the Virgin Islands Code. It endeavored to add a new chapter - 76, which would prescribe the services nursing homes and assisted living facilities should offer, impose limitations on financial charges, and define residents' rights and visitation rules.

Also encapsulated in the bill was a proposal for zoning use variance for specified plots in St. Croix and St. Thomas, intending to pave the way for more nursing homes and assisted living facilities.

In the shoes of Senator Alma Francis Heyliger, Julia Callwood voiced her support for the bill but also championed the idea of an independent living complex for low-income individuals. Along similar lines Ivan Brandy, speaking for Senator Franklin Johnson, emphasized the importance of offering more activities to the elderly, saying, "We do have facilities. But to me, we don't have enough activities. Some of us need activities." Johnson's representative also called attention to the income threshold preventing some seniors from accessing care homes.

Dr. Lawrence Benjamin, representing Senator Milton Potter, highlighted the growing trend in the aging population worldwide and the resulting strain on local services. Dr. Benjamin made a persuasive case for the proposed Senior Housing Act, arguing, "We need to be prepared not only for our local Island populations but also for those relocating and making the islands their home."

Filling in for Senator Marise James, Violet Williams decided to use her time not to speak directly on the bill, but instead to advocate for the children she loves so much, who she says are forced to contend with trying to learn in poorly maintained facilities. "I would like for someone, whoever is in charge, to do something about maintaining our schools." She also touched on transportation issues faced by seniors.

Elaine Jackman, representing Senator Diane Capeheart, addressed her anxiety about ongoing upkeep to the question of the proposed senior homes themselves. "I'm in support of the bill but I'm concerned about the maintenance. Some of us, we live in these facilities and the maintenance isn't kept up. Some of us need medical assistance every day. Some of us need our meals brought to us every day. Some of us even need our spaces cleaned everyday," she noted. "These... are the things that concern me – maintenance, and you know, how you're going to really look after us."

Joyce Thomas Heyliger, speaking on behalf of nurses in the territory's two main healthcare facilities, emphasized the daily struggle they face in assigning beds to those who need them the most. "I rise in support of Bill Number 35-000AM particularly on behalf of my fellow nurses," she stated. "Every day they have to battle whether or not they can give a needy person a bed because the beds that they will use are being taken up by boarders," she noted.

Prompted by a query from stand-in Senate President Natividad Osario, Wilma Philip, Post Auditor representative, asserted that there is funding for the proposed bill. "We gave WAPA money so we can do this. Come on, folks," she declared, to resounding and sustained applause.

The representative for Senator Ray Fonseca, expounded on the long-standing issue of limited long-term care beds for seniors. "The reports are that there are over 18,000 persons over 65 in our community. We have to be able to have facilities available for these individuals," Bergen expressed.

After the amended bill passed the mock Senate, Sharice Jurgen, director of Therapeutic Recreation for the Department of Human Services in St. Thomas/St. John, addressed the gathering and extended her gratitude for the debate. She pleaded with the elected officials present to be inspired to take real-world action on this draft legislation. "Even if just one senator brings forward this bill, we will be forever grateful and happy," she said. She further emphasized the need for enhanced facilities and the leveraging of Medicare and Medicaid funds to improve elderly care.

The impassioned pleas during the mock Senate session highlighted the essential need for enhanced elderly care services in the U.S. Virgin Islands. The hope expressed by participants is that these issues will not remain within the confines of an annual mock debate, but will incite tangible changes to improve the lives of seniors in the territory.