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# Concerns Over Additional Bureaucracy Halt Veterans Advisory Council Bill

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Senator Dwayne DeGraff's proposed bill, aiming to establish a Veterans Advisory Council in the Virgin Islands, failed to receive support from fellow lawmakers during the Committee on Government Operations meeting Wednesday.

Key stakeholders, who testified before the committee, criticized the bill for potentially adding an unnecessary layer of bureaucracy to the local Office of Veterans' Affairs.

The critics, including Director of Veterans Affairs Patrick Farrell, Major General Kodjo S. Knox-Limbacker of the Virgin Islands National Guard, American Legion Post 90 Commander Hillis Benjamin, and former Senator Stedmann Hodge Jr., asserted that the proposed legislation would likely hinder the Office of Veterans' Affairs in delivering essential services to its constituents.

"Bottom line up front, I need more clarity on how these initiatives benefit veterans beyond what is available today," remarked Limbacker. He emphasized the existence of effective structures for supporting veterans, including the Office of Veterans Affairs' affiliation with the Department of Veterans Affairs, as well as numerous federal Veterans Affairs Advisory Committees.

Meanwhile, Farrell explained that a functional Veterans Advisory Council, known as VIVA, was already established via agency policy to assist the director of the Virgin Islands Office of Veterans Affairs. "VIVA's purpose is to assist or advise the director of the Virgin Islands Office of Veterans Affairs in enhancing the quality of life for veterans and their families," Farrell elaborated.

Farrell also expressed concerns over the bill's proposal to place a liaison between the Office of Veterans Affairs and external entities. He argued that the Office was fully equipped to handle external communication and warned that additional bureaucracy could obstruct the provision of services to veterans.

Echoing Farrell's sentiment, Benjamin raised questions about the legislation's necessity, given the existence of a functioning Veterans Advisory Council. "The formation of the council provides the director of Veterans Affairs a single entity that will help to plan, coordinate, execute, and mitigate issues and concerns affecting veterans and their families," she stated.

Under extensive questioning by senators, the testifiers remained steadfast that the proposed legislation was redundant and would negatively impact the functionality of the existing council and the Office of Veterans Affairs. This robust opposition led several senators to publicly express their intent to vote against the bill—an intention that materialized when the roll was called.

Despite the disagreement on the bill, all parties maintained their commitment to addressing the unique challenges faced by veterans in the Virgin Islands and enhancing their welfare.