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Lawmakers Laud the Office of Veterans Affairs for Enhanced Services Amid Budget Discussions

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USVI VA Director Patrick Farrell. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

In a session marked by enthusiasm and commitment, the Senate Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance on Tuesday commended the Office of Veterans Affairs for their substantial improvements in veteran services.

VA Director Patrick Farrell presented the office's budget proposal for fiscal year 2024, seeking just under \$1.2 million from the territory's general fund. He outlined that the major expenses consist of personnel costs (43 percent) and reimbursements for veterans' medical travel and burial expenses (38 percent). Operating costs constitute 18.9 percent of the allocation.

Farrell highlighted that there's an upward trend in veterans choosing the \$250 reimbursement to access VA medical facilities on the mainland over Puerto Rico due to linguistic challenges. This increase in medical travel was substantiated with statistics; the office has reimbursed 195 veterans this year. Senator Carla Joseph pinpointed the contrast between the \$250 medical travel reimbursement and the \$5,000 funeral assistance, suggesting a reevaluation to aid living veterans more effectively.

Mr. Farrell then unveiled plans for a comprehensive veterans complex, aiming to centralize resources and services for veterans. "The vision is to have a one-stop shop for our veterans," he shared with Senator Dwayne DeGraff. Furthermore, Mr. Farrell envisions the establishment of a community care office in the territory, streamlining the appointment booking process for veterans.

Funding constraints were acknowledged, with the current \$1.5 million sufficient only for the demolition and design of the proposed complex. Senator Donna Frett-Gregory encouraged proactive efforts to secure funds, hinting at potential avenues like Housing and Urban Development or even the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

The possibility of providing more in-territory medical services for veterans also generated palpable excitement. Sen. Joseph emphasized the significance of familial support during healthcare and celebrated the direction towards enhancing services within the Virgin Islands.

Another highlight was the status update on a survey, projected to be finished in 45 days, which aims to provide precise data on the roughly 8,000 veterans in the territory. Concluding the hearing, Mr. Farrell appealed for a legislative amendment to facilitate direct payments for medical travel and funeral costs, reducing emotional and financial stress on families. Sen. Frett-Gregory assured him of the legislative action, stating that changes would be integrated into an upcoming bill.

Praising the notable progress in the operations of the Office of Veterans Affairs, Ms. Frett-Gregory encouraged Mr. Farrell, saying, "Stay with it... It becomes frustrating at times, but continue to give it a shot."