



TESTIMONY

DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES

**BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT SERVICES, CONSUMER AND VETERANS'
AFFAIRS**

January 22, 2016

EARLE B. OTTLEY LEGISLATIVE HALL

**Bill No. 31-0298: An Act amending Title 30, Virgin Islands Code, Chapter 1, Section 7
pertaining to Public Utilities**

Good morning Chairman Justin Harrigan Sr., members of the Committee on Government Services, Consumer and Veterans' Affairs, other members of the 31st Legislature present, fellow testifiers, members of the media, and those in the viewing and listening audience. My name is Janet Turnbull-Krigger, Assistant Commissioner of the Department of Human Services. I appear before you this morning to testify on Bill No. 31-0298, an Act amending Title 30 Virgin Islands Code, Chapter 1, Section 7 Pertaining to Public Utilities on behalf of Commissioner Vivian I. Ebbesen-Fludd who is unable to attend due to a scheduling conflict that she was unable to reschedule.

The Department of Human Services supports the intent of Bill No. 31-0298. The measure seeks to ensure that public utilities have a physical office at which consumers can settle their monthly bills. A physical office space allows customers to ask questions when there are issues with their bills, to seek clarity, and to settle bills with cash or multiple payment forms. It is difficult

to overstate the importance of this for many of our residents, and particularly the elders in our community.

There are two very important facts that guide our thinking in regards to this legislation. First, the unavoidable fact is that many of our elderly have limited access to the internet and are uncomfortable with the various online and telephonic methods of payment. The second is that the demographics of our territory are that the elderly represent a large and growing segment of our population. As such, it is the Department’s position that in the matter of public utilities, which by law provide a public service and are regulated as such, a physical customer service and payment office provides an essential option for many residents.

Anyone with any elderly relative can attest to the fact that the ability to pay their own bills and handle their own affairs is critically important to our seniors, as it allows them to maintain their sense of independence and confidence in their abilities. The trips to the various offices are part of the rhythm of life that keeps them active and socially engaged. A deviation from that routine, therefore, can be profoundly disempowering. Moreover, to the extent that seniors are induced to have others handle electronic payments for them, they become more vulnerable to identify theft, an issue on which we recently testified before this body.

The Department is aware that payments can be made at banks throughout the territory. However, we do not feel that this sufficiently addresses the needs of our seniors. Because, senior citizens on fixed incomes are heavily impacted by the inability to make a partial payment to third party representatives who may not be able to resolve issues directly and prevent an interruption of service.

In closing, we applaud the sponsors for bringing forward the aforementioned bill as we believe it will assist residents throughout the territory who do not have access to, or who are not comfortable with, the internet or electronic payment methods.

I take this opportunity to again thank you, Mr. Chairman, and other members of the 31st Legislature for your continued support of the Department of Human Services and for the opportunity to share the Department’s perspective on Bill No. 31-0298. I welcome the opportunity to respond to questions that you may have regarding the testimony provided.