



*GOVERNMENT OF
THE UNITED STATES VIRGIN ISLANDS*

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OFFICE OF VETERANS AFFAIRS



St. Croix:
Tel: (340) 773-6663
Fax: (340) 692-9563

St. Thomas:
Tel: (340) 774-6100
Fax: (340) 714-0589

OFFICE OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

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MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

A most pleasant Good Morning to you the Honorable Senator Justin Harrigan Sr., Chairman of the Committee on Government Services, Consumer and Veterans Affairs, Committee members, other distinguished Senators of the 31st Legislature. Additional greetings to all that are physically present, listening via radio or viewing via the Legislature's LEGIT TV. Last but certainly not least, to my comrades in and out of uniform known to you as the Veterans of this beloved territory, I say Thank You for your unwavering support of the Office of Veterans Affairs – VI.

I am Patrick D. Farrell, the newly appointed Director of the Office of Veterans Affairs for the United States Virgin Islands. I would like to take this time to recognize Mr. Harry Daniel who is the previous Director of the Office of Veterans Affairs. Mr. Daniel, Thank you for serving. I would also like to thank the current administration led by Governor Kenneth E. Mapp and Lieutenant Governor Osbert Potter for giving me the opportunity to serve the Veterans of this territory and the public at large.

Today, I am here to offer testimony on the status of operations and ongoing programs of the Office of Veterans Affairs. Before I do that, I would like to provide some background information on the Office of Veterans Affairs and highlight some of our 2014 accomplishments and our goals for 2015.

OUR MISSION STATEMENT:

To honor the commitment of Virgin Islands Veterans by continuing to advocate on their behalf to enhance their quality of life.

OUR VISION:

All Virgin Islands Veterans will feel like they are equivalent to all Veterans across the nation in federal entitlements, benefits and services.

The Scope and Overview of the Office of Veterans Affairs

On March 10, 1955, the First Legislature of the Virgin Islands created the Division of Veterans Affairs within the Department of Labor with the enactment of Bill No. 21, Act No. 8. It was renamed the Office of Veterans Affairs and placed under the Office of the Governor by Act No. 5265, the Government Reorganization and Consolidation Act of 1987, and by Executive Order No. 295-1987.

The Office of Veterans Affairs continues to provide current information to Veterans of the Virgin Islands as it relates to their local and federal benefits and entitlements. This includes but is not limited to available health care, educational opportunities, employment opportunities, housing opportunities,

burial benefits and the filing and processing of related claims. Additionally, the Office of Veterans Affairs recommends new legislation and amendments to current legislation to the Governor of the United States Virgin Islands in regards to Veterans and their families.

This agency is committed to serving all Veterans in a proficient and expeditious manner. We pride ourselves on the satisfaction of every Veteran that walks through our doors. Our new mission statement, vision, and strategic goals have all been revised to reflect the changes in our ever revolving society and generations of Veterans. A customer satisfaction survey has been implemented as a means of determining how well we meet the expectations of our Veterans and their families. It also sets out to document how well our Veterans are being served by the Community Based Outpatient Clinic operated by the Veterans Administration Caribbean Healthcare System. We do our best everyday trying to bridge the gap between the Federal Healthcare System and the needs of our Veterans.

This agency currently has a staff of four (4) employees – 2 on St Thomas, 1 on St. Croix and 1 Territorial, however we are currently in the process of hiring 1 more individual on the island of St. Croix. We are comparatively small in size but this can also be considered as one of our strengths. We remain dedicated to our Veterans and continue to make ourselves available to them so that in the event they need a service that we do not provide, we can quickly direct them to the proper agency or organization that does.

We are working closely with several agencies that provide services for Veterans and we look forward to working with them even closer in the up and coming fiscal year. These agencies include government agencies such as the Departments of Education, Health, Human Services, Labor, and VI Lottery. Federal government agencies or subsidiaries of that partner with us are the Veterans Administration Medical and Benefits section, Disabled American Veterans, and the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Division of the Veterans Administration. We also partner with non-profit organizations such as the Methodist Training and Outreach Center and Survivor Outreach Services.

OUR FISCAL YEAR 2014 ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The Office of Veterans Affairs

- Educated a larger population of Veterans in the Virgin Islands by promoting the services available with outreaches on each island. Because of the service we provide to our Veterans, we are committed to the same journey every year until our mission to educate every Virgin Islands Veteran is accomplished.
- Provided reliable and critical services to Veterans throughout the territory.
- Assisted the American Legion District 10 of the Virgin Islands in training their service officers to assist other Veterans in filing claims and any other areas they would need help.
- Provided training for all staff members about new and existing changes on the federal and local level.

- Created new activities to attract other Veterans from the traditional events, for example the Healthy Veteran Walk.

THE FISCAL YEAR 2015 STRATEGIC GOALS for the Office Of Veterans Affairs are as follows:

- To Ensure that Virgin Islands Veterans receive superior health care, education, employment, housing, burial benefits, and claims assistance.
- To reduce the amount and eventually eliminate the amount of Veterans having to travel outside of the territory for health care by creating a local network that will service all aspects of health issues.
- To relocate both offices into safe and ADA compliant facilities.
- To initiate the automation of all Veterans files and seek regulatory guidance on the disposition of files once the Veteran has passed away.

AND

- To Increase the amount of registered Veterans within the territory.

The road to our strategic goals may be rough however we have started the journey with an end state in mind. The office of Veterans Affairs will ensure VI Veterans receive superior health care, education, employment, housing, burial benefits, and claims assistance by enhancing the relationships already built with the entities that provide these services. I have found that moving away from behind the four walls of my office has proved to be quite beneficial simply because when you take time to go out and see the person you are dealing with on the phone, it makes your work relationship more

healthy. Shaking a person's hand and saying thank you goes a very long way; you cannot do this over a phone line.

Travel to and from San Juan Puerto Rico for medical treatment and basic medical visits have probably been the number one outcry of Veterans in the Virgin Islands. One way to fix this is to enlist more doctors locally to provide services for Veterans however; not many doctors are willing to provide service to Veterans at the rate that the U.S. Veterans Administration is reimbursing them. The U.S. Veterans Administration reimburses at a rate that takes the visit of five (5) Veterans to equal one (1) regular paying patient. I can realistically see why a doctor would have an issue servicing Veteran patients; our economy would not allow a doctor in private practice to stay afloat just by servicing Veteran patients. BUT, during a meeting with Delegate Stacy Plaskett and her staff on the island of St Croix on Monday Feb 16th 2015, I was made aware of The Veterans' Access to Care through Choice, Accountability and Transparency Act of 2014. This bipartisan bill was authored by Veterans' Affairs Committee Chairman Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont and Senator John McCain of Arizona. This bill sets out, in part, to allow Veterans facing long delays for doctor appointments at VA facilities to go elsewhere and to expand the existing VA authority to refer Veterans for private care. Veterans experiencing long delays at the VA will now be able to seek care instead at community health centers, Indian health centers, Department of Defense medical facilities or private doctors. The two-year program also would offer those same options to Veterans who live more than 40 miles from a VA hospital or clinic. I am in the process of clarifying whether or not the clinics that we have in the territory are part of what's being referenced in this language. If they are not then this bill would

temporarily fix what I consider to be the main issue that Veterans have been experiencing for years in this territory. I would also like to point out that this bill is for a period of two years and has been voted on since June of 2014.

Additionally, in my opinion both of our offices are in a condition that's not conducive for a service-providing agency. Our St. Croix office is in an ailment that should no longer be tolerated as a safe working environment or customer appropriate facility. If it rains outside it pours inside, if you stay at work until sunset the rightful owners of that building, Mr. Rodent and family, ask you to leave, and not in a pleasant manner. Commissioner designee Gustave James of Public Works was kind enough to come to the office personally after hearing our cry to assess the situation. Mr. James, I thank you. He too agrees that this structure is not fit for its current use. He has not only pledged his support but also whatever resources he can within his limits to get this building where it needs to be. The building we now occupy on St Thomas in Estate Contant does not have any parking spaces for a Veteran that needs to conduct business in our office. In addition, there are no parking spaces for disabled Veterans in the front of our building; and we have a large number of Veterans that need this type of parking space. This location is a MAJOR deterrent for our Veterans. I have initiated conversation with the appropriate agency and personnel on St Thomas that can assist us with rightfully relocating our office in short order. A staff that is comfortable within their workspace is a staff that is more likely to produce. This is a high priority for me.

Another issue of high priority is Veterans files. The files of Veterans in the territory are not automated at this time. It is my intent to identify a vendor

through the appropriate channels and get this corrected. Not having our files automated can cause us not to have a grasp of the actual amount of registered Veterans in the territory.

The Virgin Islands National Guard is willing to assist the Office of Veterans Affairs in a registration drive by allowing us to conduct this drive on their installation during a weekend that they have their monthly drill activities. This will allow us to register the younger text-book Veterans that are in the Guard but not registered.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to address you and the Committee on Government Services, Consumer and Veterans Affairs on the status of operations and ongoing programs of the Office of Veterans Affairs. At this time I am available to answer any questions that you or any member of this body may have for the Office of Veterans Affairs.