



THE DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES

**AVERIL E. GEORGE
COMMISSIONER**

Committee on Budget, Appropriations and Finance

Thursday, 12 June 2025

SENATOR NOVELLE E. FRANCIS, JR.

TESTIMONY ON BILL NO. 36-0025

An Act appropriating \$90,000 from the General Fund of the Treasury of the Government of the Virgin Islands to the Virgin Islands Department of Human Services to purchase all-in-one mobile health, wellness, and personal safety devices for Virgin Islands senior citizens and other vulnerable residents, and pay the annual service associated with maintenance of the devices.

Proposed by: Senator Ray Fonseca

Presented by the Virgin Islands Department of Human Services

Good morning Honourable Senator Novelle E. Francis, Chairman of the Committee on Budget, Appropriations and Finance, Committee members and other Senators present, colleagues, and the listening and viewing audience:

My name is Averil George, Commissioner of the Virgin Islands Department of Human Services. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on Bill No. 36-0025, An Act appropriating \$90,000 from the General Fund of the Treasury of the Government of the Virgin Islands to the Virgin Islands Department of Human Services to purchase an all-in-one mobile health, wellness, and personal safety devices for Virgin Islands senior citizens and other vulnerable residents, and pay the annual service associated with maintenance of the devices. Proposed by: Senator Ray Fonseca

Unfortunately, I will not be able to testify today due to a previously scheduled engagement. Please allow my testimony, which has been supported by DHS Adult Protective Services staff and the Office of Senior Citizens Affairs, to be read into the record.

The Department of Human Services strongly supports this bill because it represents a critical, life-saving step forward for many of our senior citizens and vulnerable residents across the Territory. The devices proposed in the legislation provide essential health and safety functions, including fall detection, location tracking, wellness monitoring, and two-way emergency communication.

These features offer more than just technology—they provide peace of mind, independence, and a vital connection to help in emergencies. For example, if a senior living alone experiences a fall and is unable to reach a phone, the device's automatic fall detection can immediately alert emergency services. Similarly, if someone with a medical condition suddenly feels unwell or disoriented, they can use the device's one-touch emergency button to call for help quickly.

For seniors prone to wandering or memory loss, the built-in GPS allows caregivers to locate them swiftly, preventing potentially dangerous situations.

Together, these capabilities help our senior citizens and vulnerable residents maintain their independence while offering vital peace of mind for them and their families.

Currently, DHS administers a one-year federal grant through the Adult Protective Services (APS) Program that funds the purchase of 125 devices. However, the grant does not cover the monthly or annual subscription fees needed to operate and maintain these devices, nor does it provide funding for any additional devices beyond the initial allocation.

The appropriation in Bill No. 36-0025 includes \$75,000 for additional device purchases and \$15,000 for the first year of subscription service fees. This funding is necessary to expand access and provide continued service to new and existing clients.

It is important to note that ongoing funding will be required to maintain and grow this program in the future. Without recurring appropriations, the Department will be unable to sustain service continuity or expand device access, and the financial responsibility may fall on vulnerable individuals who may not have the means to afford it.

To ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of the program, the Department recommends the inclusion of language in the bill that establishes a dedicated recurring funding source for both the purchase of devices and the ongoing subscription service fees. This amendment would help guarantee uninterrupted service for current users and allow for program expansion to meet the needs of additional senior citizens and vulnerable residents without placing the financial burden on individuals who may not have the means to afford it. If the unfunded mandates for the monthly service fees cannot be addressed via a new legislative funding source, then the initial 125 cohort will be selected from a pool of Seniors who can demonstrate that their Social Security benefits or other monthly income is available to support the monthly fees. It is imperative that the burden of paying these fees is not added to the current FY25 budget as the Department does not have the resources to absorb this burden in perpetuity.

The Department thanks the Legislature for its consideration of this important matter and expresses strong support for the passage of Bill No. 36-0025 as a meaningful investment in the health and safety of our senior and vulnerable populations.