

**Testimony of
Monique Clendinen Watson on Bill 35-0029
To Honor Donna M. Christensen
35th Legislature of the U.S. Virgin Islands
Committee on Government Operations,
Veterans Affairs and Consumer Protection**

July 12, 2023

Good morning, Honorable Senator Carla Joseph, distinguished Chair of the 35th Legislature of the Virgin Islands' Committee on Government Operations, Veterans Affairs and Consumer Protection. Good morning to all other honorable members of the Committee and of the 35th Legislature present here today, to everyone in the audience and those listening or viewing by other means.

I am Monique Clendinen Watson, and I served as the Chief of Staff to former Delegate to Congress Donna M. Christensen for 14 of the 18 years that she represented the Virgin Islands of the United States in the Congress.

Thank you, Senator Joseph, for giving me the high privilege of speaking in favor of Bill 35-0029 which would honor and commend Donna Marie Christian-Christensen for her tireless contributions to the people of the Virgin Islands in the field of medicine and for her representation of the territory in the U. S. Congress -- a bill that will ultimately name the new Department of Health public health facility on St. Croix, being constructed on the footprint of the old Charles Harwood complex -- in her honor.

As many of you know, former Congresswoman Donna Christensen served our territory as its Delegate to Congress from 1997 to 2014. During her tenure she was recognized for her leadership in healthcare on the local, national, and international stage for accomplishments which touched and changed the lives of millions of people. While the recitation of these

accomplishments would surely be more than enough reason to name the new public health facility in her honor, I would like to begin my testimony on her behalf, not at the time of her life when she served at the pinnacle of power, but at the time when she served her beloved community of St. Croix as a family physician. One of my family duties as a young adult was to take my grandmother to her monthly health visits with Dr. Green, as she was then known. Her Richmond offices, a block away from where the facility proposed to be named in her honor will stand, was often filled with senior citizens, young people and others who were uninsured or underinsured, and save for a visit to the emergency room, would have few other ways to access health care. I can attest that at that time, my grandmother and many others were charged no more than \$10 or \$20 dollars for their visit, and the level of care and attention that they received was appreciated not only by them, but their family members as well. On those same visits, I remember meeting a few friends from St. Thomas and St. John in her waiting room. Why you may ask was this so? It was the early 80s, at the beginning of the HIV/AIDS epidemic when fear ruled the day, and many physicians did not treat HIV/AIDS patients. So, my friends from St. Thomas and St. John had travelled to St. Croix for care, to see Dr. Green, one of the few physicians that would treat them in the territory. I was also a young reporter at the St. Croix Avis at the time, and I recall covering several events, in particular, community hearings and marches in support of building a second high school on St. Croix. Central High School at the time, was filled to capacity, on double session. Dr. Green, as she was known at the time, was head of the PTA, a position that she held because she was guardian to a young relative, her children, Karida and Rabiah, being in elementary school at the time. As a single mother, guardian, family physician with a full practice, and holding positions in the Department of Health, she also found time to be a tireless advocate for the youth of St. Croix, an advocacy that

resulted in St. Croix being granted a second high school, now known to all as the Educational Complex. Her community activism was also reflected in her memberships in organizations such as the Queen Louise Home for Children, the St. Croix Environmental Association, the Women's Coalition of St. Croix, the Caribbean Dance Company and many more too numerous to mention. To this can be added her active membership in the Faith Moravian Church community as their Delegate, Youth Advisor and Education Chair.

So why would I begin with her pre-Congressional life? It is to illustrate that for Donna Christian-Christensen, life has always been about service to community, helping the least of these, and being an advocate for what is best for everyone. She came of age in the 1960s when the slogan of many activists was "the personal is political". This was also her motto as she also was active in the Democratic Party of the Virgin Islands, holding several key positions including National Committeewoman. For Donna Christensen, her personal activism on behalf of her community and its most vulnerable members became the basis for her political career. This coupled with her family legacy of service, her father, the late Judge Almeric Christian and her grandmother, the late Elena Christian left her with an example of excellence in service. When she decided to run for Delegate to Congress, it was the core of a grateful St. Croix community who formed her key support. Many campaign workers and contributors proudly said, "I came to support my doctor, or my mother's doctor or my grandmother's doctor." They remembered and they were there for her through many election cycles.

So now I can get to the official health stuff. As Congresswoman Donna Christensen, she was elected by her colleagues to chair the Congressional Black Caucus Health Braintrust which during her tenure researched, planned, proposed, and created legislation that expanded access to health care for minority, poor and underserved communities across the country, including the

territories. The CBC Health Braintrust provided increased funding for issues to include the disparities that confront minorities as they try to access the health care system, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, substance abuse and its effects, the need for more minority physicians and health care professionals, and the need for affordable, accessible health care for all. She was influential in advocating for minority health in the Affordable Care Act. While a continuing struggle, she was a major player in increasing Medicaid funding for the territories capped at \$13 million when she became Delegate, up to \$47 million by the end of her tenure. As the first female physician to serve in the Congress, with expertise in health care and respect among her colleagues, former Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi appointed her to the House Energy and Commerce committee which oversees all health care policy and legislation for the nation. She was the first and only territorial Delegate to be a member of that committee. As a member of the Subcommittee on Health she was instrumental in obtaining funding for telehealth, information technology and comparative research to reduce costs in the territory. She has received numerous national and international awards recognizing her role in not only increasing critical funding for HIV/AIDS to the U.S. territories and communities of color, but to the countries across the Caribbean. Donna Christensen, along with her colleague Barbara Lee insisted that the PEPFAR funding being given to African countries to stem the devastation of HIV/AIDS be extended to Caribbean countries as well. It was the first significant funding that any of them had received and she was commended by many of them for this valuable assistance. She also helped create the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities and the Minority Aids Initiative at the Department of Health and Human Services, programs that continue to impact the lives of real people every day. In retirement, she consulted with the Virgin Islands Department of Health during the COVID pandemic and was instrumental in giving key advice in critical moments,

bringing her personal contacts and resources to bear. There are more health-related accolades. But I want to add that her accomplishments in energy, environment, economic development, technology, housing and small business development are just as impressive. The success of our jewelry and watch industry, rum industry, highway projects such as the Christiansted Bypass, RTPark, increased CDBG funding, port security and many other federal programs, too numerous to mention are the result of her personal attention to the issues that affect Virgin Islanders on a personal level every day.

So in closing Chairwoman Joseph, I agree that the new public health facility should be named in honor of Donna Christian-Christensen. On behalf of my former coworkers and her children, Rabiah and Karida and their families, who wanted me to emphasize their pride in their mother's activism and service, which they were a part of and which has definitely influenced who they have become, we are in full support of this bill that would honor this community elder who has spent her life taking care of her people.