



**35TH LEGISLATURE OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS
COMMITTEE ON BUDGET, APPROPRIATIONS AND FINANCE**

**The Honorable
Carla Joseph
Chair of Committee**

THE VIRGIN ISLANDS DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

Testimony

Bill No. 35-0029- An Act honoring and commending Donna Marie Christian-Christensen
M.D., for her tireless contributions to the people of the Virgin Islands in the medical field and
representation in the United States Congress

1 Good day, Honorable Senator Carla J. Joseph, Chairperson of the Committee on Government
2 Operations, Veterans Affairs and Consumer Protection, Honorable Javan E. James, Sr., Vice Chair,
3 Committee Members, and all Non-committee members, and the viewing and listening audience. I
4 am Justa “Tita” Encarnacion, Commissioner for the Virgin Islands Department of Health, and I
5 am here today in honor of the Honorable Donna Marie Christian-Christensen a mentor a colleague,
6 a friend. I am her to speak on An Act honoring and commending Donna Marie Christian-
7 Christensen, M.D., for her tireless contributions to the people of the Virgin Islands in the medical
8 field and representation in the United States Congress. The bill speaks to the renaming the Charles
9 Harwood Memorial Complex on the island of St. Croix as the “Donna M. Christian- Christensen
10 Virgin Islands Department of Public Health” in her honor.

11 Bill No. 35-0029 reads as a biography of not only her contributions and connections while serving
12 the people of the Virgin Island in her role as “Congresswoman”, but it speaks to who she was a a
13 person. It shows that Dr. Christensen dedicated her life to engaging with the people here in our
14 beautiful Virgin Islands and abroad, and with each encounter she made an impression.

15 I would like to share some personal notes from me and my staff. I first met Dr. Christensen as the
16 physician of both my parents. My father declared he was not going to ever see another doctor after
17 her first win. He soon got over that, and the relationship between Dr. Christensen and my family
18 grew stronger as my mother remained one of her biggest supporters and friends.

1 Assistant Commissioner Reuben Molloy owes his successful career to the influential guidance of
2 Dr. Donna M. Christian-Christensen. During her tenure as an Assistant Commissioner at the Virgin
3 Islands Department of Health, Dr. Christensen implemented an innovative program aimed at
4 nurturing high school students with aspirations of pursuing medical or healthcare professions. This
5 program provided invaluable opportunities for these students to gain hands-on experience by
6 rotating through different Department of Health clinics. Assistant Commissioner Molloy proudly
7 shared that three out of the five individuals have achieved their dreams of becoming medical
8 doctors. Additionally, another participant from the program has successfully pursued a career as
9 a practicing pharmacist. The profound impact of Dr. Christensen's program cannot be understated,
10 as it has shaped the trajectory of my career over the past 28 years.

11 My Chief of Staff, Shanna O'Reilly, thanks you as you were her first employer and truly guided
12 her career path. You instilled in her the want and need to continue to serve the people of the Virgin
13 Islands. You shaped her strong work ethics and enhanced her goal of working for the betterment
14 of the people in a compassionate manner that has resonated with her throughout her life.

15 During her medical and Internal Medicine residency training, Dr. Tai Hunte-Ceasar was inspired
16 by Congresswoman Christensen's footprints in history. Tai recalls being star struck in the Howard
17 University College of Medicine's auditorium listening to the first Black physician elected to the
18 US (United States) House of Representatives address Tai's medical school class about the current
19 healthcare situation. The overwhelming sensation was quickly changed to pride after the
20 presentation and speaking with the Delegate while having her classmates look on in awe of the
21 personal interaction. Her classmates could not believe that the revered, legendary Delegate had
22 known Tai since she was born and promised to extend support to Howard University College

1 Medicine with Tai as a liaison. This impression carried over to the healthcare lobbyists and Tai's
2 residency program directors who traveled with her to Washington, D.C. for national healthcare
3 legislation education. Although her visits were targeted to Florida representatives,
4 Congresswoman Christensen always allowed impromptu meetings when Tai and her residency
5 team were on the hill to educate the legislators on healthcare topics; she always took special time
6 to meet with them herself rather than sending a staffer like other Representatives. These special
7 interactions were invaluable to the professional growth of Dr. Hunte-Cesar as they gave her
8 confidence and motivation to achieve excellence. Dr. Christensen's dynamic career achievements
9 in public service has served as encouragement for the progression and evolution of many of us
10 including Dr. Hunte-Cesar's public health roles within the territory.

11 Dr. Nicole Craigwell-Syms, Assistant Commissioner, has been greatly impressed by the down-to-
12 earth nature of Dr. C, as she is affectionately known. As the operations chief during the pandemic,
13 Dr. C collaborated closely with Dr. Craigwell-Syms to develop and present strategies implemented
14 by our Emergency Preparedness Operations Team. Dr. C had a remarkable ability to lighten the
15 mood with her clever remarks and warm greetings during morning calls and adding her "one
16 liners" creating a more enjoyable experience for everyone involved and reducing stress and
17 anxiety. Dr. Syms is not the only one with behavioral wellness tricks up her sleeves.

18 Dr. Christensen stayed close to the office of the commissioner as a volunteer during the first few
19 months of my tenure as the Commissioner of Health. She looked and observed but said little. I
20 would occasionally receive a text message with thought provoking questions. She was then hired
21 as our Public Health Strategist and remained a member of our Executive Team during the COVID-
22 19 pandemic. In her role as Health Strategist, Dr. Donna Christian-Christensen shared her

1 expertise and experience in public health in the development of a *2020 Community Health*
2 *Assessment* and the *Healthy Virgin Islands 2030* community health improvement plan, which
3 serves as our framework for achieving **Healthy People 2030** goals and objectives for the US
4 Virgin Islands. A significant aspect of the planning framework is grounded in community-based
5 interventions and engagement. Dr. Donna Christian-Christensen has also answered that call by
6 launching the Christensen Institute for Community Health Empowerment, Inc, a local non-profit
7 agency focused on increasing access to primary care and advocacy, decreasing health disparities
8 and improving health equity. A non-profit that supports and expands the work of the VI (Virgin
9 Islands) Department of Health.

10 **The Charles Harwood Project:** Dr. Christensen's involvement in the project to demolish the
11 Charles Harwood Memorial Complex and construct a new state-of-the-art public health facility
12 has been unwavering since its inception. As a dedicated advocate for healthcare, she played a
13 pivotal role in the initial visioning session held in 2021 at Carambola. During this session, we had
14 the privilege of capturing Dr. Christensen's passionate commitment on video. In her inspiring
15 words, she emphasized, "Health is our shared culture, and I don't think we've done a good enough
16 job of making it that way, so I hope that this building will begin to create a culture of health and
17 Wellness in Saint Croix." Dr. Christensen's statement encapsulates the profound impact she
18 envisions for the new facility. Beyond simply constructing a physical structure, the project aims
19 to redefine the very essence of healthcare within the community. By imbuing the building with a
20 culture of health and wellness, it aspires to become a symbol of transformation and progress for
21 the people of the US Virgin Islands. From the early stages of planning, Dr. Christensen has
22 provided invaluable insight and expertise, channeling her deep understanding of the healthcare
23 landscape and the specific needs of the community. Her active participation throughout the process

1 has ensured that the project remains aligned with its core mission: to revolutionize healthcare by
2 fostering an environment that prioritizes the well-being of every individual. By contributing to the
3 project's visioning session, Dr. Christensen has not only lent her expertise but also demonstrated
4 her unwavering dedication to improving the health and quality of life of the people of the US
5 Virgin Islands. Her visionary leadership and commitment to cultivating a culture of health and
6 wellness serve as a guiding light, illuminating the path towards a brighter future for the community.
7 On that note: we also plan to house the Donna M. Christensen Library inside of the new building
8 as a further honor to you, Dr. Christensen.

9 Senators and community members, no matter what role, Dr. Christensen has filled, whether it be
10 mother and grandmother which she takes so seriously, physician, delegate to congress, chair of the
11 Congressional Black Caucus, public health strategist, and the many other hats she has worn, she
12 has done it with pride, with enthusiasm, with caring and compassion and yes with humor. Most
13 importantly, the dedicated and passionate work we witness today is primarily for us, the people of
14 the Virgin Islands.

15 In conclusion, on behalf of the Virgin Islands Department of Health, I would like to thank you, Dr.
16 C., for your continued dedication and love shown to the Virgin Islands community and more
17 specifically, the Department of Health. Senator, so many of us including Shanna who would easily
18 turn into a lion with claws for her, and the Commissioner of Public Works, Derek Gabriel who
19 was one of your many local interns. We fully support Bill No. 35-0029 that honors and commends
20 the Honorable Donna Marie Christian-Christiansen, M.D. for her unselfish and dedicated service
21 to the people of the Virgin Islands the Medical Field and as Congressional Representative to the
22 people of the Virgin Islands and renames the Charles Harwood Memorial Complex on the island

- 1 of St. Croix as the “Donna M. Christian-Christiansen Virgin Islands Department of Public Health”.
- 2 There is no one more deserving of having this state-of-the-art facility named in honor. I stand ready
- 3 to respond to any questions you may have.