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THE 35th LEGISLATURE OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

The Committee on Government Operations,
Veterans Affairs, and Consumer Protection

Re: Testimony seeking to make the case for U.S. Veterans (residing in the Virgin Islands) to be reimbursed 100% for the cost of their airfare, when seeking medical attention, at a U.S. Veterans Administration medical facility, on the U.S. mainland or Puerto Rico.

March 20, 2023

The Honorable Carla J. Joseph, Chairperson:

Good Day to you Madam Chairlady and the members of the above-named Committee -- and all other Senators. I offer my testimony, today, in my continuing effort to get your attention (and favorable reactions) on a critical Virgin Islands Veteran Affairs policy which, in it's current form is, effectively, hindering U.S. Veterans, residing in the Virgin Islands, from seeking and obtaining badly-needed and guaranteed medical services from the U.S Veterans Administration medical facilities, on the U.S. mainland, even when it becomes necessary or preferred, by the veteran.

My position, on this matter, is based upon the history of local U.S, veterans who were in dire need of healthcare and medical attention, but did not have the needed information or finances to gain access to those national programs or services that were readily available to their stateside counterparts. As God would have it, there were people like Mr. Elroy "Blabber" George, who at that time, was employed by the local Department of Labor, who loudly (and actively) advocated for the expansion of veterans rights and benefits, locally. From those struggles, the then V.I. Legislature adopted the call and created the Virgin Islands Office of

Veterans Affairs (the "Veterans Affairs"), under the Virgin Islands Department of Labor. But, even then, in those days, our veterans were having difficulties meeting the costs of travel, to Puerto Rico -- especially, if their medical needs were chronic (or persistent) but not service-connected. Some time, thereafter, the Veterans Affairs office was transferred to the Office of the Governor and, at least four (4) of its Directors (including the present Director -- under the Kenneth Mapp Administration) honored the '100% reimbursement policy'.

However, for some unexplained reason, the Office of , decided to interfere with and limit the benefits allowed for full travel reimbursement by:

- 1.) totally, denying veterans' access to the reimbursement funds;
- 2.) refusing to reimburse any veterans' travel expenses, if the veteran was assessed as disabled, at a level of 40% or above;
- 3.) limiting any reimbursement payments to a total of \$250.00, per trip; and
- 4.) in its final version, the Veterans Affairs Office now offers that any veteran's medical travel must be pre-approved, by the Director, and the reimbursement will be limited to the sum of \$250.00, regardless of the actual travel cost.

Interestingly enough, the annual Veteran Affairs Office's budget's allowance for medical travel reimbursement has never been stressed, threatened or exhausted, during the Office's existence. In fact, the budgetary records seem to reflect that a considerable amount of unspent monies have been saved, annually; so that, there have been repeated suggestions that the unspent funds, from Veterans Affairs Office should be rolled over, from now on. So that, the Veteran Affairs' current stance against medical travel reimbursement, for local veteran, is confusing to the veterans and should be deemed unnecessary and questionable.

In summary, I am urging this Legislature to institute laws and demand sensible local Veterans Affairs policies that are just, righteous, and compassionate that are always geared to the promotion and advancement of local U.S. veterans' (and their families') needs and causes.

I thank you for the opportunity to be able to address this body and I hope that you heed the local veterans' cries. I am also willing to remain available to you to answer any additional questions and to clarify any concerns I may have raised to you, today.

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