



GOVERNMENT OF
THE UNITED STATES VIRGIN ISLANDS
OFFICE OF VETERANS AFFAIRS



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Virgin Islands Office of Veterans Affairs Legislative Testimony

May 31st 2023

Honorable Carla J. Joseph, - Chairperson of the Committee on Government Operations and Consumer Protection, other Senators of the 35th Legislature of the Virgin Islands of the United States, all that are present, listening via radio, or viewing via the Legislature's LE-GIT TV, good afternoon to you. Additional greetings to my comrades in and out of uniform known to you as the Veterans of this beloved territory; Thank You once again for your service to country. Last but never least, to the staff of the Virgin Islands Office of Veterans Affairs to whom I refer to as the "Pillars" of this agency, Ms. Daniel, Mrs. Frederick, Mrs. Gordon, and Ms. Hewitt, good afternoon and thank you for your service to our territory's Veterans.

I am Patrick D. Farrell, your Director of the Virgin Islands Office of Veterans Affairs.

Today I am here to provide testimony on **Bill No. 35-0008** – An Act amending title 3 Virgin Islands Code, chapter 1, section 8a relating to the Office of Veterans Affairs to establish the Veterans Council under the Office of Veterans Affairs to serve as advisor to the Office of Veterans Affairs and as a liaison between the Office of Veterans Affairs and all private entities serving veterans in the Territory.

The Virgin Islands Office of Veterans Affairs is not in favor of this bill in its current state. To my understanding, the proposed bill seeks to create legislation mandating the Office of Veterans Affairs to establish a Veterans Advisory Council. Currently, there is a newly established and functional Virgin Islands Veterans Advisory Council (VIVAC) which was created via agency policy. VIVAC's purpose is to assist/advise the director of the Virgin Islands Office of Veterans Affairs in enhancing the quality of life for Veterans and their families by doing the following:

- recommending new legislation
- recommending additions and or deletions to current policies
- bringing attention to deficiencies within the Veteran community

Once advised, if the recommendation is found to be beneficial to the Virgin Islands Veteran community, the Director would then take it, or them, to the appropriate organization or level of government for further consideration. Recommendations have the possibility of reaching the level of being recommended for possible legislation.

VIVAC's initial meeting was Thursday October 13th, 2022. Since then, there have been two subsequent meetings, and one which was postponed due to a schedule conflict with our Veterans Health and Benefit Fairs just last week. The council has elected its leadership; Dr. Muria Nisbett as Chairperson, Kai Callwood as Vice-Chairperson and Venetta Charles as Secretary. Now, the council is actively creating the governing document of the council more intimately known as by-laws. Once the by-laws are completed, the council will be meeting on a quarterly basis.

As it relates to someone else being a liaison between the Office of Veterans Affairs and all private or non-profit entities serving veterans in the Territory, the Office of Veterans Affairs is quite capable of dealing directly with outside entities. This is something we have been doing for years without an issue. On a normal basis we serve over 450 Veterans per month. This number drastically increases when we have initiatives or events of significance. For example, recently we launched an initiative to have Veterans identified on their driver's license which saw at least an extra three hundred Veterans within one month walk into our doors. Last week, our Health and Benefit Fair saw almost 400 Veterans in two days. Our quarterly town halls average an additional one hundred and seventy-five Veterans in a two-day period. Starting something of this nature at this point will only impede Veterans from getting the services that they have earned by adding layers of bureaucracy. Case and point, a member of this community reached out to the Office of Veterans Affairs just yesterday for assistance. The assistance was not for them personally but for another family. We in turn had to reach out to the family in need directly due to the person not knowing what resources were available. This was an impediment simply because there was an unnecessary step in between. Time is life in most cases. We cannot afford the extra layer, especially when our Veterans are sick. What we can afford is for organizations or agencies to serve as referring entities for those Veterans or families of Veterans who may not know where to seek the necessary services. Placing another layer between the Veteran, or his or her family and the service is not the way to go. Additionally, the council as a liaison would need to be trained by this same Office of Veterans Affairs. I don't know of another entity within the Virgin Islands with a better relationship between them and the United States Department of Veterans Affairs. I say all of this to say, it will be to our disadvantage to create another entity or layer, to try and accomplish what's already being accomplished.

If I misunderstood the intent of this legislation, I look forward to hearing clarification.

Chairman Joseph, distinguished members of the Committee on Government Operations and Consumer Protection, and other Senators of the 35th Legislature of the Virgin Islands of the United States, the Virgin Islands Office of Veterans Affairs respect the important work that you have done and continue to do to enhance the quality of life and well-being of territory's Veterans and their families. With your help and continued support, we can ensure our Veterans and their needs are adequately resourced and remain a priority. The challenges we overcome today

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become the foundation of our promise to serve those who have borne the battle, their families, and their survivors. Our commitment to Veterans of the Virgin Islands and those Veterans who decide to make their home within our shores will remain steadfast. Subject to your questions, this concludes my testimony.

Thank You.