

Testimony
Stedmann Hodge, Jr. State Chair
Democratic Party of the Virgin Islands
Committee on Government Operations, Veterans Affairs and Consumer
Protection
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Good day, Honorable Chairwoman, Carla J. Joseph, Honorable Javan E. James, Sr., Vice-Chair, members of the Committee on Government Operations, Veterans Affairs and Consumer Protection, other members of the 35th Legislature of the Virgin Islands of the United States, and the listening and viewing audience. I am Stedmann Hodge, Jr., State Chair of the Democratic Party of the Virgin Islands, a former Senator, Army Veteran and concerned citizen residing the US Virgin Islands.

As a Veteran, I found it to be very important to share my view on Bill No. 35-0008 – 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.

First, I would like to state the purpose of any Veterans Council or Veterans Advisory Council which is to represent and serve local military veterans organizations and to act as liaison between local Government and Veterans Organizations on issues affecting veterans and veterans benefits. The council will be comprised of recognized National Veterans organizations whose members served in the armed forces of the United States, and/or their auxiliaries.

Specifically, to address Veteran issues that cannot or are not be resolved through the normal Government agencies, to inform Veteran Organizations in the Territory of these issues which will enable a coordinated effort to mitigate the issue and to assist Veterans or their families on what organizations are available to them, in resolving issues arising from military service.

Bill No. 35-0008 aims to create a Veterans Council to provide oversight for the Office of Veterans Affairs as an advisor. This section of the legislation becomes problematic as it creates a Council that can only provide advice and cannot engage in decision-making. The Office of Veterans Affairs is a Government Entity that does not require a board or require a council to advise a board. An advisory council consists of a group of outside advisors who work alongside a board of directors to enhance board governance. It's important that we do not create situations that just gives a voice to veterans without truly empowering the other veteran organization as stated in the second part of the proposed legislation.

The second part of the proposed legislation is a necessary element for the Territory but does not need to be legislated. Bill 35-0008 proposes that the Veterans Council will also serve as a liaison between the Office of Veterans Affairs and all private entities serving veterans in the Territory. When private organization create a coalition, committee or council, they organize to address issues, lobby for funding or services and support each organization goals by providing needed services for the public.

It is my hope that the Committee on Government Operations, Veteran Affairs and Consumer Protection vote against Bill No. 35-0008. If the Committee does support Bill No. 35-0008, it should only be to support the liaison between the Office of Veteran Affairs and all private entities serving veterans. This element is necessary as it will meet the needs of all veterans in the Territory to access information and services under a council that provides access to those services offered by said private entities.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony before the Committee on Government Operations, Veterans Affairs and Consumer Protection.