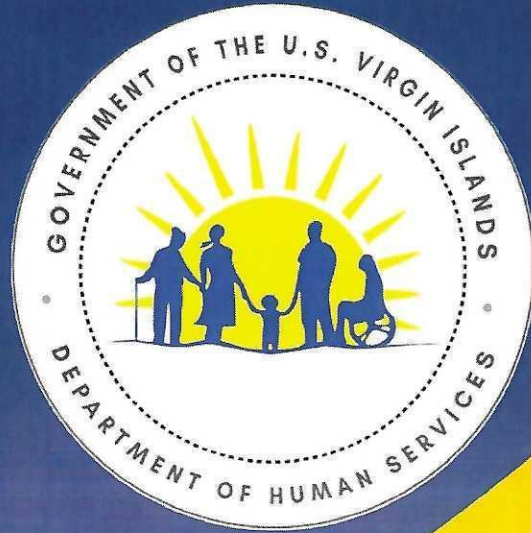


GOVERNOR'S NOMINATION OF AVERIL E. GEORGE LEGISLATIVE TESTIMONY

Wednesday, March 20, 2024



COMMITTEE ON RULES AND JUDICIARY

CHAIR: SENATOR DIANE T. CAPEHART

PREPARED BY:

Averil E. George
Commissioner Nominee



**Committee on Rules and the Judiciary
35th Legislature of the Virgin Islands**

March 20, 2024

**Testimony of Averil Elisha George, Nominee for
the Commissioner of Department of Human
Services**

Good day, Honorable Senator Diane T. Capehart, Chairman of the 35th Legislature's Committee on Rules and Judiciary, distinguished members of the Rules Committee, other Honorable Senators, my hardworking Department of Human Service Staff, my family, my friends, and the listening and viewing audience in support of my nomination as the Commissioner of the Virgin Islands Department of Human Services.

My name is Averil Elisha George. I was born and raised on the beautiful island of St. Croix, where I am extremely humbled and honored to be blessed with the opportunity and privilege to serve the people of the Virgin Islands. Every day I thank God for His continued blessing and mercies. My thanks and appreciation go out to the Honorable Albert Bryan Jr., Governor of the Virgin Islands, and his administration for believing in me, my knowledge, my skills, and my abilities to perform this role. It is my pledge before this committee and the people of the Virgin Islands that I will work every day to fulfill the mandates and goals of the V.I. Department of Human Services to the best of my ability.

Honorable Senators, I come before this Committee for your consideration and acceptance of my new role, but first I must outline my journey by sharing things about myself. I was born and raised on St. Croix to my loving parents Bernadine and Roderick George. Growing up in Ralph De Chabert Project, I am a true testament that it takes a village to raise a child. Always remembering where I came from has prepared me for this journey. As I continue to pursue new ventures, my

memories, and my foundation of being hard working and appreciative of my opportunities have molded me into the person I am today.

My educational journey includes attending Juanita Gardine Elementary School, Elena Christian Junior High School, and graduating from The Central High School in 1989 (Go CARIBS). In my post-secondary educational pursuit, I earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Accounting from the University of the Virgin Islands and a Master of Business Administration degree from the University of Phoenix. Other professional and career related certifications include becoming a Certified Public Manager in August 2018 via the University of the Virgin Islands, and a Certified Wellness Program Coordinator. Attending UVI was my best educational experience under the tutelage of the best professors. I obtained an education that focused on the learner to prepare them for life, not just for assessments. I also must give a plug that UVI currently offers free tuition to qualified individuals. My philosophy is, "The knowledge you have attained should be used to make a difference in your community." My mom also instilled in me and my six siblings, - the importance and value of a good education and hard work. Nelson "Madiba" Mandela quoted, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world"; this is my mantra. Outside of my professional life, I have volunteered with many non-profit agencies to include the following:

- Charter Member - SHRM VI
- Vice President - Helping Our People Emerge (HOPE INC)
- Treasurer – Virgin Islands Basketball Federation
- Former Chairman – Board of Governors United Way of St. Croix
- Public Relations Officer – Barron Spot Fun Club
- Past Member – Rotary Club of St Croix West
- Fundraising Chair – CHS Class of 1989

I am the proud mother of two beautiful daughters, Whitney and Khadijah; being a mother and parenting has undoubtedly been the most rewarding experience in my life.

Throughout my career, and in every interview, the question of my strengths as a leader has been asked. Allow me to mention a few in my possession:

- Strong organizational skills;
- Detail-oriented;
- Accountable;
- Ability to promote a positive work environment that encourages open communication, trust, mutual respect, and accessibility;
- Excellent interpersonal skills which include conflict resolution and the ability to make sound and fair decisions;
- Ability to foster and maintain effective working relations with all individuals and employees under my charge;
- Ability to promote team building opportunities;
- Excellent communication and people skills.

These abilities allow me to lead by example and serve as the foundation for effective leadership.

Much of my work career was rooted in the private sector, having worked for employers such as the Hovensa Refinery and eventually as a consultant for the Limetree Bay Terminal. In 2015, the then Governor Kenneth Mapp requested that I join the Division of Personnel in the capacity of Assistant Director, under the leadership of the now Senator Milton Potter, which kick started my career in public service. Former Governor Mapp then petitioned me to assume the role of Acting Commissioner at the Department of Labor. After a short term in that position, I then left and joined Limetree Bay Terminal as a Financial Management Consultant. Upon completion of my contract, I then rejoined the Government under the Bryan Roach Administration at the Department of Public Works where I served as the Director of Human Resources and Payroll under the leadership of Commissioner Derek Gabriel and was promoted to Assistant Commissioner. You will all remember our slogan “DPW on the Move.” We all know with good work comes more work, so I was then tapped by Governor Bryan to assume the Commissionership of the Department of Human Services on

October 2, 2023. Our slogan is now “DHS on the Rise.”

The knowledge I have attained and the leadership style that I bring to the Department of Human Services might be different than others, but the timing is right for me to be placed in this position. I am not one to micromanage and I do not lead by fear. My leadership style is one of a “Servant Leader.” I lead by example and tend to focus on the needs of others, especially team members before considering my own. This in turn has allowed me to boost engagement, increase trust, and build better team relationships. I always lean on the side of policies and procedures.

Upon Governor Bryan’s request, I immediately began familiarizing myself with the Department of Human Services. This included watching previous years of Budget Hearings, reviewing post audit reports, published testimonies, and combing through the DHS’s website and social media platforms. I would like to thank former Commissioner Kimberley-Causey Gomez for arranging transition meetings with herself and the leadership team. People that know me personally know that I am always up for a challenge and the word “CAN’T” is not a part of my vocabulary. “Why Not Me?” are words I repeat to myself when it comes to accepting challenges. So, I decided to roll up my sleeves and get to work.

The Virgin Islands Department of Human Services (DHS) receives its authority pursuant to Title 34 of the Virgin Islands Code (V.I.C.), the designated State Agency for all publicly financed social service programs. We serve over a third (1/3) of the Territory’s population through our eighty-four (84) programs within our 15 divisions across all three islands. DHS plays a critical role in sustaining individuals, families, institutions, and the local economy through rendering our services daily and through pursuing and successfully securing additional federal funds and enhanced federal matches.

The mission of the Virgin Islands Department of Human Services is to emerge as a public sector agency that empowers individuals and families toward self-sufficiency through a seamless delivery system of services. I will add that at DHS we take care of Virgin Islanders from the cradle to the grave.

The Virgin Islands Department of Human Services has 669 dedicated professionals' territory wide with three hundred fifty (359) professionals in the St. Croix district and three hundred eleven (310) professionals in the St. Thomas/St. John district. These hardworking individuals cover all fifteen divisions and eighty-four programs.

Since October 2, 2023, I have made it my priority to meet with staff of all capacities primarily at their workstations or locations and made my rounds at the various offices throughout the Territory. This is a continuous process. As I was onboarded, I decided to open an office in the Mars Hill location which I work out of at least two times a week. This allows me to make myself accessible to those Divisions on the Western end of the island. I must report that despite less than favorable working conditions, the tenacity coupled with resilience of the staffing is commendable. The employees of the Department of Human Services are committed to doing their jobs. I commend the employees for their tireless efforts in serving the most vulnerable of our population. I too am committed to working alongside these men and women to improve working conditions across the board and to improve upon the services we provide to our community.

Also, as the Commissioner of the Department of Human Services I have the opportunity of being a member of the VI Housing Authority Board of Commissioners in which I attend monthly meetings.

Over the past 169 days of my tenure, the DHS team has achieved the following:

- The Department thus far for the Fiscal Year 2024 has hired forty-seven (47) employees – thirty-one (31) of which were classified and sixteen (16) exempts.

- The internalization of audio and video production operations by the Communications team. This shift has empowered our team to create original content that revolves around the Department's crucial programs. Notably, the team has introduced the "Your VIDHS Podcast," available on YouTube, Apple Music, Buzzsprout.com and linked to other DHS social media platforms. These podcast episodes aim to provide educational and substantive information to the wider community, offering insights into navigating the array of services provided by the Department. Our first episode in November featured the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP), providing crucial details on eligibility, cost-of-living adjustments (COLA), recent federal changes, application processes, and recertification. December highlighted Medicaid, January focused on Head Start, February highlighted the Temporary Assistance for Needy Family (TANF) Program, and March highlighted SNAP and Medicaid Fraud. I encourage the public follow our Facebook Page and to stay tuned for concise, informative monthly episodes on these essential programs.
- In January, accompanied by members of my Senior Leadership Team in addition to the Director of Medicaid, we visited key service providers in the South Florida area. Meetings were held with various Medicaid providers, inclusive of hospital providers, skilled nursing facilities, and the various hotels who provide services to the program members. Our goals were to personally view and assess the level of care being provided to our members, identify, and address any operational or procedural challenges to the coordination of care for our members and to identify approaches to better service our members and their families when they travel to obtain medical care. We used this opportunity to strengthen our relationships with existing providers, as well as cultivate new relationships with additional ones to improve access to care for our members. This included finding opportunities to reduce costs and increase efficiency such as negotiating fixed rates with

various hotels and presenting the opportunity to enroll hotel providers in our claims program. The DHS team will be making additional visits to other jurisdictions where DHS contracts services and to local service providers to ensure that our clients are receiving the utmost quality of care to meet their needs.

- During this time, we also began the design process for three prudent replacement disaster recovery projects (Knud Hansen, Queen Louise for the Aged, Herbert Grigg) and completed the land purchase for the new location of the Queen Louise Home for the Aged which we are very proud of.
- In my short tenure, I have made myself available to attend court hearings and to be intimately involved in helping address our community's needs. While being subpoenaed to appear in court may have a negative connotation to some, it provided an ideal opportunity that resulted in a positive outcome. Receiving a commendation from Judge Jessica Gallivan regarding my willingness to collaborate with the Court and to lend personal time and attention to others was rewarding and bodes well for continued positive collaboration and outcomes. This provided a clearer perspective on the Department's mission and how the services we provide affect the quality of life for our most vulnerable population.
- The relaunch of STATS for employee electronic Time and Attendance

Things are optimistic and trending in a positive direction, however, there is still a lot of work to be done which will also require involvement and support from this legislative body. Allow me to highlight my short- and long-term goals at this time.

Short Term Goals - completion within 12 to 18 months.

- Hiring adequate staffing;
- Improving employee morale;
- Addressing facility issues to create a safe and comfortable working environment;
- Establishing a tracking mechanism for all payments from requisition through check processing;
- Improving customer service experience for both call-in and in-person interactions with the department;
- Developing and updating standard operating policies and procedures;
- Continuing to build Federal Partnerships and capitalize on our existing bimonthly/monthly meetings on specific Federal project initiatives;
- Optimizing and managing the spending of our federal funds;
- Collaborating with UVI regarding recruiting eligible social workers;
- Offering targeted professional development opportunities for employees; and
- Traveling to other DHS contracted residential facilities in the mainland.

Long Term Goals – completion within 24 to 36 months.

- Digitizing processes and offering online applications for the various programs;
- Centralizing the procurement process to one unit within the Department;
- Implementing a transparent model of functionality that allows overall efficiency and effectiveness in overall management and spending of our funds. This includes digitalization the fiscal operation, inclusive of vendor payments;
- Implementing a Senior Services Case Management System for comprehensive end-to-end provision of elderly care; and

- Continued collaboration with our sister agencies, such as Department of Health, Juan Luis Hospital, Roy Lester Schneider Hospital, both Federally Qualified Health Centers and the myriad of Non-Profits that receive grants or awards via DHS Miscellaneous fund. I look forward to continue working with them in a systematic and logical way to enhance the customer experience for residents of the USVI.

These are a few of the priorities I have determined thus far and look forward to continuing my assessment and working with this body to effectuate the necessary changes to the benefit of our clients and the Department.

Closing

Today is a moment of great significance as I provided testimony in support of my nomination for Commissioner of Department of Human Services. It is with profound humility and a deep sense of responsibility that I embark on this journey to serve my community.

I am immensely grateful for the trust that Governor Albert Bryan Jr. placed in me. With a profound understanding of the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead, I am excited to embark on this journey alongside my staff at DHS. Together, we will work towards creating positive change, fostering transparency, integrity, and confidentiality, and building a community that thrives on collaboration and inclusivity.

The services rendered by these hard-working employees resonate loudly with myself and my family as we too have used services provided by this department. So, I too have been on that proverbial side of the fence, and I am keenly aware of how impactful and important the services provided by DHS are to our clients. I am also aware of the weight of the responsibilities that come with this office,

and I assure you that I will approach each decision with the utmost dedication and integrity. My goal is to be a steadfast advocate for the betterment of our community.

I am grateful for the support of my DHS team, my family, friends, my fellow Cabinet members, my former colleagues from the various agencies, private and public, and all those who have encouraged me on this path. With your continued support, I am confident that we can achieve great things together.

Senators, it is my belief that with my background combined with my strong leadership style that I can lead the Department of Human Services to greater success and help to build a department with a staff that strives to be stronger and smarter tomorrow, than it was yesterday. I would once again like to thank the management and staff of the Department of Human Services for their hard work and dedication and for joining me on this journey. The success of the Department of Human Services does not lie with me alone and it takes a team effort for us to be successful. Once again thank you for the opportunity to present myself and I welcome your questions.