

THE HONORABLE SENATOR AVERY L. LEWIS

Legislative Secretary

36TH LEGISLATURE OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS



Chair: Committee on Government Operations, Veterans Affairs, Consumer Protection

Vice Chair: Committee on Education and Workforce Development

Member: Committee on Rules and Judiciary

Committee on Culture, Youth, Aging, and Parks

Committee on Homeland Security, Justice and Public Safety

Committee of the Whole

COMMITTEE REPORT

COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS, VETERANS

AFFAIRS, AND CONSUMER PROTECTION

Senator Avery L. Lewis, Chair

Date: June 23, 2025

Location: Earle B. Ottley Legislative Hall, St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands

The Committee on Government Operations, Veterans Affairs, and Consumer Protection, chaired by Senator Avery L. Lewis, convened to receive testimony and consider several legislative proposals affecting governance, public safety, retirement systems, and legislative recognition. The Committee considered four measures:

IN BLOCK 1:

- **Bill No. 36-0090** – An act amending title 1 Virgin Islands Code, chapter 11 by adding section 200m to declare the week beginning the Monday before the first Friday in June as the Virgin Islands Gun Violence Awareness Week, sponsored by *Senator Angel Bolques, Jr.*

The **Purpose** of the bill is:

To designate the week beginning on the Monday before the first Friday in June as “Virgin Islands Gun Violence Awareness Week,” providing an annual opportunity for education, outreach, and community collaboration to address gun violence in the Territory.

In Discussion:

- Antonio Emanuel, Director of the Office of Gun Violence Prevention, expressed full support. He emphasized that the week would foster interagency and community partnerships to address systemic causes of violence and support victims.
- Commissioner Mario M. Brooks, Virgin Islands Police Department, also supported the bill by submitting a letter, stating the Territory had recorded 21 homicides as of June 2025. He urged continued public education and awareness efforts.

COMMITTEE ACTION:

APPROVED – Bill forwarded to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary.

- **Bill No. 36-0097** – A resolution commending the National Conference of State Legislatures (“NCSL”) on its 50th anniversary and recognizing the NCSL for its commitment to the legislative institution, Sponsored by Senator Milton E. Potter

The **Purpose** of the bill is:

To formally recognize NCSL for five decades of nonpartisan support and service to legislative bodies across the United States and its territories.

In Discussion:

Senators unanimously supported the measure. Chair Lewis highlighted the importance of aligning with national organizations that support legislative integrity, best practices, and the useful technical assistance the organization offers.

COMMITTEE ACTION:

APPROVED UNANIMOUSLY – Resolution forwarded to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary.

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In Block 2:

• **Bill No. 36-0012** – An Act amending title 3 Virgin Islands Code, chapter 27 to streamline the GERS disability annuity approval procedures and for other related issues, Sponsored by Senator Milton E. Potter

The **Purpose** of the Bill is:

1. To streamline the Government Employees' Retirement System (GERS) disability annuity process;
2. To reduce delays in the processing of disability annuity applications by eliminating the Medical Review Committee step in uncontested cases.

KEY TESTIMONY:

• Dwane Callwood, Chairman, GERS Board of Trustees, testified in favor, stating the change would reduce costs and expedite the process. He recommended amending the bill's language from "all" to "any" on Pages 1 and 2 for clarity.

GERS Administrator Angel Dawson testified in support of the measure

COMMITTEE ACTION: THE VOTE

APPROVED WITH AMENDMENTS – Bill forwarded to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary.

Bill No. 36-0066: An Act amending title 29 Virgin Islands Code, chapter 15 by adding a section 928a providing that all officials and employees of the Virgin Islands Public Finance Authority and its wholly owned subsidiaries must be members of the Government Employees Retirement System of the Virgin Islands Sponsor: Senator Alma Francis Heyliger

The Purpose of the Bill:

To ensure uniform retirement coverage across all publicly affiliated entities, including WICO and viNGN.

KEY TESTIMONY & CONCERNS:

- Angel E. Dawson, GERS Administrator, supported the measure with proposed amendments:

1. Contributions should follow existing government remittance frequencies
2. Mandate should apply only to new hires; current employees should have an opt-in provision

- Nathan Simmonds, PFA Director of Finance & Administration, opposed the bill, arguing subsidiaries operate independently and the measure imposes unsustainable financial burdens.

- Stephan Adams, President & CEO of viNGN, cited a 1,173% increase in employer retirement costs, projecting contributions rising from \$44,276 to \$563,835 annually. He warned that the cost would force layoffs or threaten the company's solvency and urged that viNGN be exempted.

COMMITTEE ACTION: THE VOTE

HELD IN COMMITTEE – Pending additional review and fiscal impact analysis.

CHAIR'S REMARKS:

Senator Lewis acknowledged the legal precedent classifying WICO and viNGN as public corporations but emphasized the severe financial implications for viNGN if the bill were enacted without further study or exemptions. This is an issue that warrants attention in the near future.

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ATTENDANCE

Senators present during the hearing were:

- Senator Avery L. Lewis, Chair
- Senator Novelle E. Francis, Jr.
- Senator Ray Fonseca
- Senator Alma Francis Heyliger
- Senator Kenneth L. Gittens
- Senator Franklin D. Johnson
- Senator Carla J. Joseph

Non-Committee Members:

- Senator Angel L. Bolques, Jr.
- Senator Milton E. Potter

CONCLUSION

The Committee on Government Operations, Veterans Affairs, and Consumer Protection approved three measures and held one for further consideration.

Approved & Forwarded to Rules and Judiciary:

- Bill No. 36-0090 – Gun Violence Awareness Week
- Bill No. 36-0097 – Honoring NCSL
- Bill No. 36-0012 – GERS Disability Annuity Reform (with amendments)
- Bill No. 36-0066 – GERS Mandate for PFA Subsidiaries: Held in Committee: