

Bill No. 36-0134, Testimony
Ophelia Williams-Jackson, M.ED.

Good day, Honorable Avery Lewis, Chairman for the Committee on Government Operations, Veterans Affairs and Consumer Protection, honorable Senators of the 36th Legislature, and the viewing and listening public. I appear before you today not only as a public servant and educator but as someone who has personally experienced the heavy cost of civic ambition under the current system. I offer my strong support for Bill No 36-0134, introduced by Senator Marise C. James, which seeks to repeal and reenact Title 18, Chapter 1, Section 2 of the Virgin Islands Code. — a bill that restores fairness, equity, and dignity to public employees who wish to serve their people through elected office.

As someone who believes in the power of leadership to positively change lives, especially for our children, our schools, and our community, I decided to run for the Senate several times while employed by the Government of the Virgin Islands. I speak not only from belief but from experience. Each campaign required me to make significant personal and professional sacrifices. I temporarily lost my family government health insurance, went months without pay, half a year to be exact, forfeited contributions toward my retirement, and saw my years of service interrupted—affecting my overall time-in-service and retirement calculation.

The situation is even more unequal when comparing different categories of public employees. A 12-month employee must use annual leave to run for office, already a heavy burden. A 10-month employee, such as a teacher or other educational professional, has no annual leave and therefore must take leave without pay during the campaign period. That means some government workers lose income, insurance, and time served, while others can at least use accrued leave. These inconsistencies show why reform is long overdue.

These are not just inconveniences. These are real hardships that discourage capable, experienced, and passionate public servants from stepping forward. Many of us love this territory enough to serve it beyond our assigned duties, but under current law, we are punished for having the courage to do so.

Even more concerning is the clear disparity between government employees and sitting elected officials. In the Virgin Islands, Senators, Governors, and Lieutenant Governors who seek re-election are not required to take leave from their positions while campaigning. They continue to receive their salaries and benefits throughout the election period. Yet, a dedicated government worker; someone who teaches our children, protects our communities, or serves our agencies—must take leave or go without pay simply for aspiring to serve at a higher level. That is not fair, and it contradicts the democratic principle of equal opportunity.

Bill No. 36-0134 encourages civic participation. It opens the democratic process to experienced public servants who understand the inner workings of government and have a direct connection to the community. It promotes fairness and equality, leveling the playing field by allowing employees to seek office without losing benefits or financial stability. It expands representation

by ensuring that leadership opportunities are not limited to those who can afford to take unpaid leave, thereby increasing diversity in governance. It demonstrates that our government values engagement, fairness, and civic responsibility rather than punishing ambition; that strengthens democracy.

Some may say if the law is changed, employees seeking office may create a blur between campaigning and performing official duties; or agencies may face challenges in enforcing the law; or difficulties in executing fairly, due to pay grade.

These are valid considerations—but none of them are reasons to reject the bill. If it needs strengthening, collaborate and make adjustment. The goal should be balance, not barrier.

This legislation is not about politics—it is about principle. It is about ensuring that public service is not punished. It corrects an inequity that has long discouraged passionate, qualified government employees from offering themselves for elected office.

Supporting this bill means saying *yes* to civic participation, *yes* to fairness, *yes* to democracy and *yes* to ensuring that the people of this territory have the right to vote from a slate of individuals who step forward out of genuine commitment to serve, those driven by ambition to serve, not deterred by restrictive laws that punish them for doing so. It means telling every public servant that their voice matters, and that they should not have to choose between serving their people and supporting their families.

And so, the question is not why support Bill No. 36-0134—the question is why not support it? Why not support fairness?

Why not support opportunity?

Why not support those who have already dedicated their lives to this government and this community?

This bill is not just about employees, it is about empowering public service, broadening representation, and ensuring a government that reflects the people who make it work every day.

Let us not penalize commitment—let us reward it.

Let us not silence experience—let us amplify it.

Let us pass this bill to ensure that no government worker—12-month or 10-month—ever has to experience what I have experienced, which is to choose between serving their people and/or sustaining their family again.

I thank you for the opportunity to speak before you and the people of this territory.

Submitted by: Ophelia “Nemmy” Wms-Jackson
Retired Educator