



Legislature Of The Virgin Islands

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Committee on Youth, Sports, Parks & Recreation

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SEXUAL ORIENTATION DISCRIMINATION, TAXICAB COMMISSION EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR EMPOWERMENT AND WAPA SUBPOENA DELIBERATED IN GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS

ST. THOMAS, USVI - The Committee on Government Operations and Consumer Protection, chaired by Senator Carla J. Joseph, met on Wednesday, September 14, 2022, in Earle B. Ottley Legislative Hall on St. Thomas.

The Committee received testimony on two bills to include amending the VI Code to address sexual orientation discrimination and to expand the functions of the Taxicab Commission's Executive Director. The Committee was also slated to receive testimony from the VI Water and Power Authority on its operations, challenges and actions to resolve current issues.

In Block I, the Committee received testimony from Neshia Christian-Hendrickson, Esq. Assistant Commissioner Virgin Islands Department of Labor Virgin Islands; Ms. Cindy Richardson, Director Virgin Islands Division of Personnel, and Eric S. Chancellor, Esq., Assistant Attorney General Virgin Islands Department of Justice and Troy deChabert-Schuster, Virgin Islands Chapter of on Bill No. 34-0271 – An act amending title 10 Virgin Islands Code, chapter 5, section 64 of the Civil Rights Act to include discrimination based on sexual orientation as an unlawful discriminatory practice.

Testifiers all agreed with the move to implement the legislation. Assistant Commissioner of the Department of Labor recommended the inclusion of pregnancy as well as gender identity to address all concerns. While the Local AARP recommended policy development for government agencies, anti-discrimination training, the establishment of an Office of Inclusivity within the VI Department of Personnel and measures to provide protection and enforcement of the laws.

Director of Personnel indicated that new employee trainings which are conducted every 2-weeks include a 2-hour presentation on discrimination and agencies may independently request trainings for their departments. However, senators agreed that the sexual discrimination trainings should be conducted annual and provided to all agencies as a means of being proactive and staying Intune with evolving discussions, rules and policies.

The Department of Labor also indicated that webinars and training is provided to the private sector employers and workplace postings of rules and regulations are required onsite for employee information.

Assistant Attorney General Chancellor said the legislation would bring the Virgin Islands in line with 27 States, Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia to address and protect the Civil Rights of persons in the territory as it relates to gender equality and discrimination.

Senator Joseph said, “any type of discrimination for individuals being marginalized should not be tolerated, She said “it is a cause to be fought for as we should be respectful of each other’s decisions as long as it does not hurt anybody.”

The committee approved the bill sponsored by Senator Janelle K. Sarauw. It now moves forward to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary for further consideration.

In Block II, the Committee received testimony from Ms. Vernice Gumbs, Acting Executive Director of the Virgin Islands Taxicab Commission, Ms. Loretta Lloyd, Chairwoman of the Board, Mr. Shane Benjamin, Former Executive Director and Ms. Linda Smith, Former Executive Director on Bill No. 34-0272 – An Act amending title 3 Virgin Islands Code, chapter 16, section 274 to empower the Executive Director of the Taxicab Commission to hire the necessary staff to operate and manage the Taxicab Commission office.

Senators were displeased with the Commission’s Operations as revealed with eye opening testimony by the two most recent former Taxicab Commission Executive Directors, who reported on micromanagement, lack of best management practices and failure to act which has stalled the effectiveness of the Taxicab Commission. Senators decried the lack of staffing, financial accountability, board reporting and delay in finalizing new tariffs which impact the livelihood of local entrepreneurs in the Taxi and Tour Operations Industry.

The bill sponsored by Senator Janelle K. Sarauw was approved and forward to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary.

In the final block, the Committee was slated to receive testimony from representatives of the Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority. Senator Joseph noted that for the third consecutive time, the Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority has failed to appear before the committee. Senator Joseph said, I like to give people the benefit of the doubt and I tried to work with WAPA in setting dates that would be amendable for them to come forward. As a result of the No Show once again by WAPA, Senator Joseph garnered a consensus by the committee on her decision to subpoena WAPA to appear before the Committee on Government Operations and Consumer Protection at a meeting she calls. Committee members concurred with Senator Joseph and voted in favor of issuing a subpoena to WAPA to appear.

Senators present at Wednesday's committee meeting include committee members Senators Carla Joseph, Marvin A. Blyden, Alma Francis Heyliger, Franklin D. Johnson, and Javan James, Sr. Non-committee member present was Senators Janelle K. Sarauw and Committee Senator Milton Potter was absent.

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