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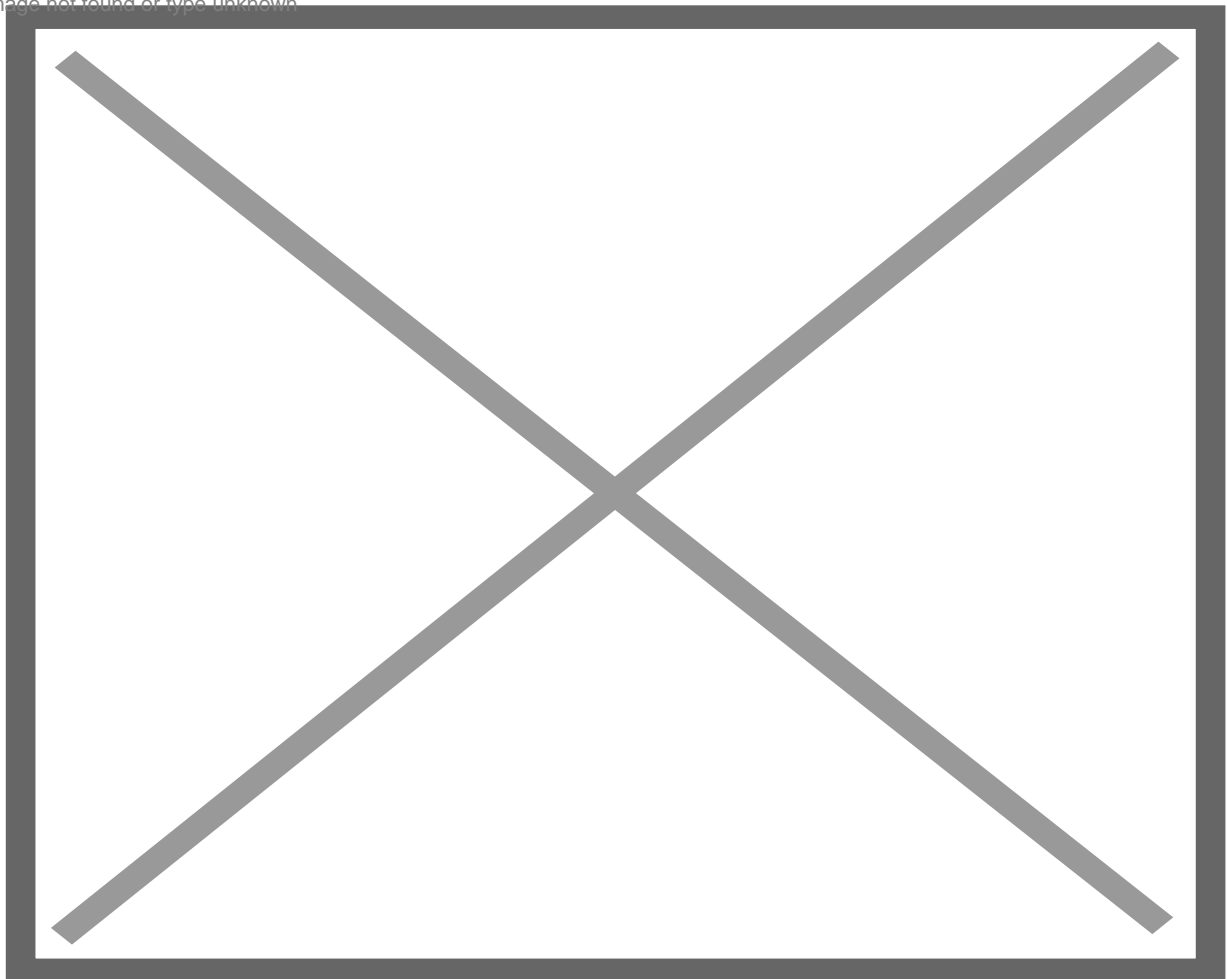
Senators Move Legislation to Formalize Ham Radio Operators' Role in Emergency Response

Auxiliary Communications Unit to Boost Emergency Communication

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Lawmakers have taken the first step to strengthen the dissemination of vital information across the territory in the event of natural, or other disasters, after the Committee on Homeland Security, Justice, and Public Safety approved Bill 35-0175 on Thursday.

The measure seeks to amend Virgin Islands Code to establish an Auxiliary Communications Unit within the Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency (VITEMA).

The proposed new unit would comprise amateur or ham radio operators acting as an “auxiliary communications resource,” during times of need. According to bill sponsor Senator Dwayne DeGraff, “ham radio operators have informally assisted us after natural disasters for many years,

and this legislation codifies their role at VITEMA.”

Mr. DeGraff explained that “volunteers will be considered territorial members of the Civil Defense Volunteer Corps.” Their invaluable assistance has already been proven, as ham operator Celia Kalousek testified, recounting how operators were able to inform residents of Coral Bay that more bad weather was coming after the passage of Hurricane Irma.

Fred Kleber testified on behalf of the territory’s cohort of ham radio operators. As he explained, 35 ham radio operators in the USVI already classified under the Amateur Radio Emergency Services (ARES) would be the initial cohort included in the Auxiliary Communications Unit proposed for VITEMA. An upcoming licensing exam, Mr. Kleber said, could grow those numbers. Standards would be maintained by VITEMA performing background checks through the VIPD on all operators who qualify to be part of the new unit.

Admitting that there are risks associated with the transmission of incorrect information, especially during a public emergency, Mr. Kleber noted the importance of “getting it right every time.” Senator Franklin Johnson agreed with that assessment, warning, “there's a good side about this and there's also a bad side if it's not done right.”

Notwithstanding their tremendous responsibility, Mr. Kleber expressed gratitude that the draft legislation provides for liability relief for amateur radio operators who have been “previously vetted and approved in accordance with the auxiliary communication unit.”

Committee members were pleased to learn that the establishment of the proposed Auxiliary Communications Unit would not cost the Government of the Virgin Islands additional sums, as ham radio operators' license prohibits them accepting payment. “At no time will compensation be paid to amateur radio operators for their time, their expertise or for the use of their community equipment,” clarified Mr. Kleber.

For VITEMA’s part, Assistant Director Steven DeBlasio affirmed that the proposed legislation “only strengthens our ability to fulfill our mandate.” Noting previous communication challenges during severe natural disasters due to the USVI’s “geographic isolation and topography,” Mr. DeBlasio stated, “it is without doubt that as stated in Bill 35-0175, emergency preparedness and disaster response across the territory would be improved.”

Mr. DeBlasio explained to Sen. Angel Bolques that while members of the unit would not be financially compensated, they would be included in all VITEMA training sessions and emergency response drills. Mr. DeBlasio testified that if a ham operator was injured while performing national duty, they would be “readily taken care of just like we would any of our standard government employees.” Identification badges, curfew passes, and meals would also be afforded to members of the yet-to-be-formed unit.

Regarding possible injury, Sen. Gittens suggested that VITEMA have “a written policy in place, that if God forbid, any of these volunteers are injured while in volunteer service that we will be able to assist them with whatever medical coverage or whatever assistance that we are allowed to do within the confines of the law.”

The draft bill will now proceed to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary, thanks to a favorable vote by all present committee members.