

Diabetes Center's \$1 Million Funding Request Splits Lawmakers Over Support for Nonprofits and Chronic Care Services

The Center says the money would support a residency program with Howard University, expand chronic care management and improve services on St. John and St. Thomas, while some senators questioned whether government should fund nonprofits at that level.

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Dr. Julia Sheen, center, at the new VIDCOE facility in the Sion Farm Shopping Center. She is flanked by Sen. Angel Bolques Jr., left, and Sen. Ray Fonseca, right. By. VIDCOE.

A request for \$1 million from the Community Facilities Trust Fund to support the Virgin Islands Diabetes Center of Excellence drew differing reactions from lawmakers, with some questioning

whether the funding would be an appropriate use of government resources.

The request has been brought to the attention of Governor Albert Bryan Jr. and legislators. According to Dr. Donna Christiansen, VIDCOE's board chair, the funding is needed to help implement a residency program in partnership with Howard University and other local health entities, including the Department of Health. It would also support expansion of VIDCOE's Chronic Care Management Program and service enhancements on St. John and St. Thomas.

Dr. Christiansen appeared before the Committee on Health, Hospitals, and Human Services on Monday during a discussion on the Center's operations. She thanked lawmakers for what appeared to be support from the Legislature.

However, the discussion soon showed that some senators remained uncertain about the request.

"I hate to waste money on duplicate services," said Senator Hubert Frederick, who raised concern that VIDCOE and the Department of Health could be overlapping in several service areas.

Dr. Nicole Craigwell-Syms, assistant commissioner in the Department of Health, confirmed to Senator Frederick that DOH could "absolutely" use an additional \$1 million for its Chronic Disease Program.

Her response reinforced Senator Frederick's position that "as a government...our primary responsibility is to fund agencies that we have oversight, which is the Department of Health."

Mr. Frederick argued that nonprofits should be "funded through private means and grants." Instead, he told his colleagues, "we're beginning to see a trend now when, when they can't get grants, they come to us as a body for funding."

Senator Frederick said his position was not personal. "I'm loyal to my agencies," he said.

"I'm sorry that they might run into problems getting funding, but that is not our primary charter," Mr. Frederick continued, adding that his comments were made without "malice."

"I don't know why we think it's necessary to fund nonprofits at that level..I don't mind helping them out with some money, but you know, when you start hitting a million dollars, that's a substantial amount of money," he said.

Senator Carla Joseph expressed similar concerns and asked Dr. Christiansen whether VIDCOE had explored other funding sources, telling her that "you can't just be relying on government funds." Ms. Joseph also reminded the Center that "we barely have any money."

Dr. Christiansen described several funding sources, including "grants from USDA in the amount of \$185,000 and a grant from HRSA at DHS in the amount of \$995,000." She also said VIDCOE bills insurance providers, as well as Medicare and Medicaid.

"I am not totally convinced that you have explored all opportunities," Senator Joseph said, encouraging Dr. Christiansen to pursue grants and endowments.

"We have just given you, as seed money, the \$500,000 wherein you're now asking for that money to be doubled to a million dollars...knowing that the Department of Health, which is the premier entity that provides this service, is also struggling," Ms. Joseph said.

Senator Joseph later suggested that services be integrated.

Dr. Christiansen said VIDCOE will increase outreach to private foundations “as well as doing some local funding.”

Other lawmakers supported the \$1 million request, including Senators Ray Fonseca, Novelle Francis and Kurt Vialet.

“I’ll continue to advocate for us to be able to fund this particular area,” Senator Francis said.

“Let’s consider that this is money well spent,” Senator Fonseca added.

Senator Vialet also supported the need for funding, though he said the request is “really not an appropriate use for the Community Facilities Trust Fund.” Still, he said the Legislature must identify a more permanent funding source because VIDCOE is establishing ongoing programs.

“At some point, you need to have a very direct budget as to what is the cost for this for the Center for Excellence, and what portion of that is going to become a general fund obligation,” Senator Vialet said.

His position differed from Senator Frederick’s argument that nonprofits should not rely on the Legislature for that level of government funding.