



Statement of the  
Honorable Donna M. Christensen  
Delegate to Congress, U.S. Virgin Islands  
Senior Plenary Session, IGIA

Tuesday, February 25, 2014

Good afternoon to all, but special greetings to Secretary Sally Jewel, Director David Agnew, our Governors and my fellow Delegates. I also want to recognize Virgin Islands Senate President Shawn Michael Malone, who is sitting in on today's meeting.

While there are many issues that need to be raised, given the time limitations, I want to focus on just a few today. Once again I have asked for a special meeting and the Department and the White House, as well as the relevant agencies have been responsive. I thank you for that.

Today it is the Department of Health and Human Services and while it is not a special meeting, time is set aside to focus in this meeting on the implementation of the Affordable Care Act in the territories. I doubt that one hour is enough time and hope that unless our issue is resolved in that time that we continue to meet until a fair resolution can be reached. Also complicating this matter is the possibility that the governors and Delegates may not be on the same exact page.

To frame the issue in simple terms, my constituents and those of my colleagues equate the ACA or Obamacare with having an exchange. And well they should because the central premise and promise is affordable coverage for all Americans. So again, in this most basic right we are being treated as less than second class citizens.

And yes, I know we were included, but to be eligible without equitable and adequate funding is to not be included at all? I just want to point out that the House while it did exclude us from the federal exchange did provide 400% more funding than the final bill.

All of us have significant segments of our population who today have no possibility of getting health insurance and the Delegates are asking for fairness to prevail and that our districts be allowed to participate in the Federal exchange.

We know all of the benefits we have received from the law thus far so a report on that is not necessary today. What we need to come to agreement on is how the Federal government will extend eligibility and additional funding to enable that participation.

On the other issues, I attended some of the Brand USA Conference with our Economic Development Authority leadership. It was a good start. As you know the Pacific territories have had visa waiver programs in place for many years. I would look forward to support for my Visa Waiver demonstration program legislation for CARICOM countries to visit the USVI. Given that many of my constituents have families in those countries, the availability of low cost shopping and the high level of services that our cardiac and cancer facilities are able to provide, we can assist our neighbors while also stimulating the Virgin Islands economy. It can also help to enhance US-Caribbean relations. I also look for you to be our advocate when regulations threaten to reduce our competitiveness vis a vis our foreign neighbors.

On Energy: We are grateful and have benefitted from the EDIN project that is not being reported on today, for the support of the underground mitigation funding from FEMA, the Environmental Protection Agency drinking water funding and the U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Utilities Services \$13 million dollar loan to enable the Virgin Islands Water And Power Authority's automated metering initiative, but have been disappointed that we have not been able to get more funding assistance from the Department Of Energy given that our consumers pay the highest per kilowatt rate in the country that burden is hurting our families and killing our small businesses and thus our economic recovery. If we haven't asked the right questions, please let us follow up.

On the other hand I want to especially thank the Department of Commerce, especially their Economic Development Offices, for the visits and grants we have received following the special IGIA and their ongoing support. I especially look forward to the planned interagency conference which should go a long way to helping answer on behalf of the federal government the question my constituents often ask, "Does the federal government care about us and the challenges we are facing?" I hope that my office will be able provide input as the planning moves forward.

At Commerce, one very important area we need to resolve with the Bureau of Census is an update of our poverty level which is far higher than reported in 2010, has already drastically reduced some funding and could greatly limit our ability to assist our most needy constituents.

I want to acknowledge the invaluable support we have received from Nick Pula and Mr. Basil Ottley at the Office of Insular Affairs. I look forward to the discussions and thank you to the Department of Interior and the White House for convening us once again and the agencies for their participation.