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Senators Clash Over \$1.7M Fund Transfer for Education Department: Francis Cites Bureaucracy, Frett-Gregory Demands Scrutiny

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Janeke Simon **September 07, 2023**

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From left to right, Deputy Commissioner Kimo Smith, Sen. Novelle Francis, and Sen. Donna Frett-Gregory. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

In a heated debate during Wednesday's meeting of the Senate Committee on Budget, Appropriations and Finance, lawmakers clashed over a \$1.7 million fund transfer request from the Department of Education. D.O.E. sought the transfer from the personnel and fringe budget category to "other services and charges". Senators Novelle Francis and Donna Frett-Gregory were particularly at odds, articulating divergent viewpoints on the department's recurring fund transfer appeals for settling longstanding vendor debts.

Education Deputy Commissioner Kimo Smith provided clarification to Senator Francis that the \$1.7 million would enable the department to clear their outstanding debt to vendors, some debts being nearly a decade old. Smith also confirmed to Senator Samuel Carrion that the department aims to transition into a regular 30-day payment cycle for future obligations.

However, Committee Chair Senator Donna Frett-Gregory voiced her concerns about the Department of Education's repetitive funding requests for the same purpose. She questioned why the department struggled year-on-year with processing payments, pointing to similar fund transfer requests of about \$3 million in previous years. Smith responded that prior requests had gone unanswered due to lack of funding, but he remained optimistic that settling these long-standing debts would normalize future payment cycles.

Frett-Gregory was not satisfied with Smith's explanation and insisted on an external review. She tasked the Office of Management and Budget Director Jenifer O'Neal with enlisting the Department of Property and Procurement to evaluate the payment claims from vendors, stressing that claims must be accompanied by evidence of completed work. "We ain't trying to participate in no bobol in here, you know," she added.

Senator Francis then interjected, arguing that the Department of Education's delayed payments often stem from bureaucratic mishaps rather than a lack of evidence of work done. "A lot of times we call on contractors to perform the work on an emergency basis. And these individuals perform the work and [are] never compensated," he said. Smith agreed, mentioning that emergencies on school campuses often necessitate immediate action and that vendors are generally reliable under such circumstances.

In her concluding remarks, Frett-Gregory noted that an external review would reconcile these opposing viewpoints. Smith reassured the committee that since the obligations had already been vetted internally by the Department of Education, there would be no problems providing the necessary documentation. The senator also urged for a comprehensive list of outstanding debts to be shared with lawmakers.

Among the pending payments were charges for garbage collection, including tipping fees that service providers had added and were not initially budgeted for, Smith elaborated. Additionally, Smith indicated that a transaction for virtual instruction from Houghton Mifflin, initially earmarked for federal funding, had lapsed and was now the department's responsibility.

Ultimately, the \$1.7 million fund transfer for the Department of Education was approved by the committee, although the debate highlighted deep divisions in how lawmakers perceive the handling of financial obligations by government departments.