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Testamark Pushes Back Against Employee Complaints, Says Leadership Style May Have Offended Some at Bureau of Corrections

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Wynn Timer Testamark testifies during a hearing in the Senate Committee on Homeland Security, Justice, Public Safety and Veterans' Affairs By. VI
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Governor Albert Bryan's pick to lead the Bureau of Corrections, Wynn Timer Testamark, came out swinging during a Senate hearing on Thursday sparked in part by a Consortium report of multiple resignations and firings at the bureau under Ms. Testamark's tenure. Two bureau sources, a current, longtime employee of the bureau, and another who recently left, told the Consortium in January that B.O.C., already struggling under a federal consent decree and internal issues, was made worse by the new director, who they said operated the penitentiary facility with little regard

for the input of support staff.

The report, coupled with complaints being received at the time by senators, led to Thursday's hearing in the Committee on Homeland Security, Justice, Public Safety and Veterans' Affairs, where at least some lawmakers sought to get to the bottom of the matter.

During her testimony, Ms. Testamark sought to portray herself as a no-nonsense person whose leadership style may have offended some employees. But she dismissed staff complaints that she was being disrespectful, while highlighting a number of successes at the bureau she said were achieved during her tenure. Governor Bryan [announced Testamark](#) as his pick to lead B.O.C. on Feb. 9, 2019. The director also spoke of the myriad of issues she met at the bureau when she took the helm. However, after roughly a year of being the leader, she said, "We are no longer an agency in crisis; we are now an agency in transition. And we have begun to rise."

Later during her testimony, Ms. Testamark took aim at the Consortium report. Describing this online news publication as a blog, she said the depiction of "widespread resignations and dismissals" was inaccurate. "Some of the persons in the positions listed resigned before I ever joined the Bureau. Some left because they were in exempt positions, and there was a change in administrations. This is common in government, not just at the Bureau," Ms. Testamark said.

Wynnie Testamark interacts on Thursday at the Senate (VI Legislature)



Even so, during questioning from Committee Chair Steven D. Payne Sr., who said his office had also received concerning reports not from regular employees but management and leadership personnel, Ms. Testamark named a myriad of employees that she had replaced following the resignations and firings. This came after she had asked the senator to name the positions he was referring to that were left empty after individuals had resigned and some fired.

"In the past year you've lost about 15 positions. You've lost your labor relations manager, fiscal manager, legal counsel, compliance manager, executive assistant, warden St. Thomas, warden St. Croix, chief investigator, training director, programs and grants manager, fire life safety, administrative specialist, compliance officer and health services administrator," Mr. Payne listed, falling in line with many of the positions [listed in the Consortium's January report](#).

Mr. Payne asked Ms. Testamark about her leadership style. "My management style is I'm inclusive," she said.

Asked whether she had managed employees in her past roles, Ms. Testamark said hundreds and sometimes even thousands. Seeking specificity, Mr. Payne asked Ms. Testamark what positions she held when she managed those employees, the director said she was the accreditation manager and an executive officer (not CEO). Ms. Testamark revealed that her highest position in prior correctional facilities was equivalent to a warden.

Among the complaints from B.O.C. management that Mr. Payne's office received, were times where the complainants said Ms. Testamark spoke to them in unbecoming ways in the presence of other staff members — making for an embarrassing scene.

Speaking to the other B.O.C. leadership members gathered at the hearing, Mr. Payne said it was his hope that moving forward, if they were to see such behavior, that they would speak to the director in private about it. "Because a lot of these complaints did not come from your entry level officers," Mr. Payne reiterated.

Senator Kurt Violet, who expressed satisfaction with the achievements listed in Ms. Testamark's testimony, and said he believed that she was indeed trying to implement positive changes, stated that the director needed to do a better job in communicating those plans with staff.

"I think one of the most important parts of leadership is being able to convince those who are not within your circle, who are not on your bandwagon," Mr. Violet said.

"Because you're hearing people are frustrated, they're thinking about retirement, they're thinking about leaving, and if that happens, then it's harder for you to accomplish your goals. So I think you need to seriously develop a mechanism to motivate those who are not yet a part of believing in your goals; how you're going to get them over. And you can't do it with brimstone. You have to use a different psychological approach in order to get through to those individuals. I'm really hoping that you can develop that," Mr. Violet said.

Mr. Payne, a former law enforcement officer himself, spoke of his experience in the U.S. as a civilian and how he was treated by law enforcement. He recalled an incident where he was ticketed, but because he knew he was not wrong, he challenged the citation. "I had to deal with things like, 'shut up boy'," Mr. Payne said, recalling how a white police officer treated him during the traffic stop.

Convinced he had not broken any law or violated traffic, he challenged the citation in court. Yet, even there, the judge was dismissive of Mr. Payne's complaint. "As I'm finished, [the judge said], 'are you finished'?" Mr. Payne was ordered to pay the court fines.

"I had to come back home in the V.I., and in the V.I., we are very big on manners. We are big on respect," Mr. Payne said. "We are not culturally accustomed to having people talk down to us and dismiss us."

He added, "As a police officer, a teacher, a former counselor, I never looked down on the work that anyone did before me."

Mr. Payne then referred to a quote in Ms. Testamark's testimony from Dr. Ken Ray, the court-appointed monitor for the Golden Grove Correctional Facility, which Ms. Testamark highlighted as one of the remarks that shows that the bureau is headed in the right direction. The quote reads, "One of the things is that they have expanded their intellectual capacity in leadership. And as our week [of inspections] progressed, that became palpable, and I could see it."

This quote offended Mr. Payne. "You know what that's saying to the rest of you all who been here for years? You all dumb. You all are intellectually challenged." Mr. Payne said if he were the director, he would not have included the quote in his testimony, "because I would have seen it as a slap to all the people that I work with. The people that were here before."

He added: "Nobody in corrections was smart? Nobody? And only since December 2019, now the people in corrections are seen as smart? That bothers me. It may not bother anybody else, but it seriously bothers me."