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Senators Press for Action Against Traffic Violations Amid Agency Understaffing

Lack of traffic citations issued raises questions on law enforcement priorities in the USVI

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Nelcia Charlemagne **February 14, 2024**

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On Tuesday, several lawmakers on the Committee of Homeland Security, Justice and Public Safety fretted over the lack of traffic citations coming from the agencies before the committee.

“We have people running red lights, we have people operating vehicles unregistered, no license plate, broken windshield — everything and we have some 22 certified law enforcement agencies, not just the police department,” committee chair Senator Kenneth Gittens stated. “If all our law enforcement entities are doing their fair share, we will have one of the safest communities,” he declared.

Officers within enforcement divisions of various government agencies – the Taxicab Commission, Department of Licensing and Consumer Affairs, Department of Health, and Department of Planning and Natural Resources among them – are sworn peace officers with the authority to issue traffic citations. However, following a question from Senator Novelle Francis, agency representatives cited understaffing as the main reason for not pursuing that aspect of enforcement more vigorously.

Environmental Health Director Wanson Harris explained that they had been “unable to obtain traffic citation books,” while Wilbur Francis, DLCA’s Director of Enforcement said that particular administrative task had not been given much priority due to the other pressing daily needs of the agency. Director of DPNR’s enforcement division, Howard Forbes, said that his officers were focused on satisfying the requirements of the Coast Guard, which provides a significant portion of his agency’s funding.

However, Mr. Gittens reminded DPNR that the agency also received funding from local government as well. “While we provide [this] funding, we expect full enforcement by all our law enforcement entities.” He said that all sworn peace officers should embrace their full role, no matter which agency they are assigned to. “We just can’t minus or delete once we graduate from the Academy,” he asserted.

With each entity confirming that they own a vehicle that could be used for enforcement purposes, Senator Franklin Johnson expressed disappointment that more was not being done to tackle the multitude of traffic violations that occur daily on the territory’s roadways. The worst part about it is you’re driving a government vehicle with lights and everything, and you’re doing nothing,” the lawmaker said.

However, Horace Graham, DCLA’s assistant commissioner, told senators that “just the active vehicle being along the street ...serves as a very, very critical deterrent for what potentially could be many, many more accidents.”

Notwithstanding the human resource constraints, Sen. Francis, a former law enforcement officer himself, said that there should be more attention paid to the issue. “While I hear that there might be some challenges, I think that we should work collectively to make sure that we are addressing those challenges because again, it has a serious impact into this community. And if we’re all in this together, I truly believe that by supporting the other law enforcement agencies, that we could make some inroads,” he declared.

Sen. Johnson concurred with that sentiment, noting that “if we combine 22 agencies...with peace officer status, we have the biggest police force out there.” He, like the Senate president, urged greater collaboration between agencies for more effective enforcement of the territory’s laws and regulations, reminding peace officers that they could be charged themselves for failing to act within their role.