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VI Government Agencies Urged to Address Enforcement Officer Shortfall

Senate Committee on Homeland Security, Justice and Public Safety pushes for increased staffing in upcoming budget

Government / **Published On February 15, 2024 05:15 AM /**

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Senator Kenneth Gittens has urged several agencies to intensify their recruitment efforts to bolster their enforcement divisions, a decision made during a Senate hearing Tuesday following an in-depth review of agency operations.

Mr. Gittens, chair of the Committee on Homeland Security, Justice and Public Safety, was perturbed by low staffing numbers and encouraged each agency head to plan for the upcoming fiscal year with those considerations in mind.

“For the next budget cycle, we expect to see requests so that we can hire people,” he told representatives of the Taxicab Commission, the Department of Planning and Natural Resources, the Department of Licensing and Consumer Affairs, and the Department of Health.

Probing by committee members revealed that each unit was severely understaffed, which representatives said occasionally results in the inability to ensure maximum compliance within their respective jurisdictions.

For example, the Department of Health’s Environmental Health Division, which has the responsibility of regulating approximately 6,000 establishments, currently employs three enforcement officers. And while DOH is in the process of hiring three more, Director Wanson Harris said the ideal team would comprise of twelve officers.

Meanwhile, DLCA shares seven enforcement officers between the two districts. With the responsibility for monitoring over 12,000 businesses, Director of Enforcement Wilbur Francis told lawmakers that “we can use seven more.”

Senator Franklin Johnson also encouraged Mr. Francis to “bring this to the floor [and] explain what your needs are” during the upcoming budget cycle. According to Sen. Johnson, staff shortages in income generating agencies like DCLA cause them to “leave the money on the table all the time.”

Sen. Gittens also encouraged the Department of Health to make a case for the hiring of additional Neighborhood Nuisance Officers, calling it a “real important position.” There is only one individual employed in that role, covering the entire territory. As explained by the DOH, the lone Nuisance Officer handles issues including abandoned vehicles on private property, overgrown bushes, and “open pools left unattended for the breeding of mosquitoes.”

DPNR, with a complement of eleven enforcement officers on staff – 6 on St. Thomas/St. John and the remainder on St. Croix – explained that ten officers per district would make their job easier. The Taxicab Commission, too, is facing a severe shortage of enforcement officers. TCC Director Vernice Gumbs shared that there are currently no enforcement officers for the St. Croix district since the last individual retired in August 2023. While there are two officers in the St. Thomas/St. John district, one has been on medical leave since the start of 2024. Ten officers would be an adequate complement, Ms. Gumbs volunteered.

The TCC does have plans to hire “the right people” in the upcoming month, Ms. Gumbs said. However, with only one working enforcement officer in the entire territory, Ms. Gumbs told committee members that the Commission has been “unable to maximize its potential to enforce the rules and regulations of the Commission.” She disclosed that in the past five months or so, only ten taxi citations have been issued, for a total of \$2,200.

With budget hearings expected to begin in June, lawmakers seem to have signaled their willingness to allocate funding to beef up the complement of enforcement personnel across the 22 agencies tasked with the responsibility of ensuring persons abide by the territory’s laws and regulations.