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VIPA Struggles to Fill Law Enforcement Ranks on St. Croix Despite \$5K Sign-on Bonus

Incentives fail to draw new law enforcement officers to St. Croix district

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Despite offering a \$5,000 sign-on bonus for new recruits in the St. Croix district, the V.I. Port Authority’s law enforcement department continues to face challenges in attracting team members, according to VIPA’s assistant executive director Bill Rawlins, who testified on the matter before the Committee on Homeland Security, Justice, and Public Safety on Tuesday.

VIPA currently employs 22 law enforcement officers in the St. Thomas/St. John district and 10 officers on St. Croix. The officers are responsible for “protecting life and property” at the territory’s airports and seaports. To address “serious staffing challenges”, Mr. Rawlins told lawmakers that VIPA is currently engaging in an “aggressive recruitment program” which

includes the additional financial incentive. However, that dangling carrot seems to go unnoticed as the perk has been in place for two to three years at this point, with few positive responses to date. Lawmakers learned that applicants on St. Thomas/St. John qualify for a smaller bonus – \$1000 – and in both districts, the bonuses would be paid out after a successful six-month probationary period.

By way of reply to Senator Dwayne DeGraff, VIPA revealed that a recruit does not currently have to commit to working for the authority for any amount of time after receiving the bonus. They are hoping to change that policy once new contracts are ratified. For Senator Alma Francis-Heyliger, the fact that the bonus is taxed “might be part of the problem.” “By the time you take out taxes, you ain’t really incentivizing me at all... Maybe if you bump it up, and they do walk away with \$5,000, that might be a different story,” she suggested.

VIPA’s inability to attract a full complement of officers on staff has resulted in the need to hire private security firms to provide support at VIPA’s properties, Mr. Rawlins noted.

During Tuesday’s meeting, lawmakers learned that VIPA is not the only entity facing challenges. The Waste Management Authority is also struggling to meet its optimal staff cohort of twenty officers, ten inspectors, and two compliance officers. The agency’s current complement comprises only six environmental enforcement officers and four enforcement inspectors. While several recruits selected following a November interview process are awaiting their start date, the WMA still falls short of the necessary manpower to provide “around the clock” coverage to “combat the growing problem of illegal dumping at our territories bin sites landfills, businesses, residential areas, wastewater facilities and manholes,” said Anderson Poleon, senior director of WMA’s Environmental Enforcement Division. To achieve the required increase in staffing numbers, he told lawmakers that “additional financial resources, considering the authority is severely underfunded” would be key.

Apart from additional manpower, WMA needs to acquire six unmarked utility terrain vehicles with trail cameras to improve enforcement efforts, “because the illegal dumping is occurring in dense bushy areas where our environment enforcement vehicles cannot traverse,” said Mr. Poleon. The agency also requires updated equipment, surveillance drones, and additional cameras.

Lawmakers wondered whether starting salaries for the enforcement positions within VIPA and WMA were contributing to their staffing challenges. Salaries at the Port Authority start at \$40,953.00 while WMA offers \$35,000 to starting recruits and \$41,200 after graduating from the academy. The VI Lottery, also invited to provide an update on enforcement efforts, offers a starting salary of \$45,000, with all three agencies offering varying benefits. VI Lottery, with the highest starting salary, has only two open enforcement positions in St. Croix, but hopes to fill them within the next two months.

For WMA and VIPA, these personnel deficiencies are contributing to operational challenges, lawmakers were told. For WMA, the aforementioned issues are compounded by an inability to identify suitably qualified candidates following background checks.

This week’s meeting of the Committee on Homeland Security, Justice and Public Safety formed part of Senator Kenneth Gittens’ series of update hearings from agencies with law enforcement arms. “My push for enforcement efforts is to make the place a safer place,” he told colleagues on Tuesday, “not to lock them up and throw away the key.”