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With Potential Historic 2024 Hurricane Season Looming, VITEMA Has Less Funding and Struggles to Staff 911 Call Centers

Amid predictions of an intense hurricane season, the V.I. Territorial Emergency Management Agency grapples with reduced funding and significant vacancies, raising concerns about its readiness and response capabilities

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VITEMA Director Daryl Jaschen By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

The Senate Committee on Budget Appropriations and Finance has asked the V.I. Territorial Emergency Management Agency to submit a long list of supplementary documentation to clarify categories in their FY2025 budget of nearly \$12 million. Meanwhile, VITEMA Director Daryl

Jaschen says the agency must find ways to remain effective despite a reduced budget.

VITEMA was the second agency to defend its budget ask before the committee as the FY2025 budget season shifts into high gear, requesting \$11,860,891. As Mr. Jaschen outlined, the proposed budget would draw approximately \$5.9 million from the general fund, with \$4.9 million coming from the federal government and just over \$967,000 from the Emergency Services Fund. Coming in at almost 4.4% less than what the 35th Legislature approved for the previous financial year, Mr. Jaschen told lawmakers that VITEMA is preparing to face several financial challenges.

“For 2024, VITEMA has seen a reduction in all the grants it receives. There is a 10% reduction in Department of Homeland Security grants and emergency management performance grants; a 66.5% [reduction] in the nonprofit security grant program, and a 54% reduction in a National Tsunami Hazard Mitigation grant,” he explained. It is expected that VITEMA’s FY2025 grants will face similar reductions. The lower funding levels are expected to “impact the service we provide the territory,” admitted Mr. Jaschen, though VITEMA has promised to “strive to provide the best service we can.”?

Attracting and retaining talent is another chronic difficulty, expected to persist for the foreseeable future. Mr. Jaschen disclosed that in the past six months, VITEMA has lost “key personnel”, mainly due to “career advancement opportunities and higher pay...Many who are new to emergency management learn the fast-paced and stressful environment may not be for them,” he said. Adequately staffing the 911 Emergency Call Centers continues to challenge VITEMA, with 7 current vacancies in each district. The Office of Management and Budget has allocated funding to fill crucial vacancies, but VITEMA’s leadership says the associated starting salary - \$35,035 - seems to be a hindrance to recruitment efforts.?

In the upcoming fiscal year, VITEMA also hopes to hire one Disability Integration Coordinator per district, with a recommended salary of \$60,000 along with fringe benefits. Another \$30,000 will be required for equipment and training per position.

Notwithstanding the information delivered during Mr. Jaschen’s testimony, committee chair Senator Donna Frett-Gregory observed that the documentation lawmakers received from VITEMA omitted several key details necessary for sound decision-making. VITEMA’s executive team was also unable to answer some questions posed by committee members, including how many of the budgeted vacancies in the FY2024 budget had been filled to date.

Senator Frett-Gregory also expressed frustration that the agency’s submitted budget figures did not align with what is documented in the Office of Management and Budget’s FY2025 [Budget Book](#). She begged VITEMA – and other government agencies – to review their budget figures closely, as the laborious process of resolving discrepancies adds delay to the already lengthy committee hearings. “That’s where the frustration is coming,” lamented the committee chair.?

As a result of the missing documentation, some of VITEMA’s “homework”, as Mr. Jaschen put it, is to provide the committee with a breakdown of all federal grants inclusive of expenditures and expiration dates, a list of all vacant positions for FY2025 along with the total cost of the positions, a utility expenses report to guide projects for the FY2025 utility budget, a breakdown of VITEMA’s “other services and charges” category, a breakdown of indirect cost balances to date and projections, and a full contract amount and name of the vendor awarded to repair tsunami sirens around the territory.

Mr. Jaschen made a point of noting in his testimony that subsequent to these repairs to the ten non-operational sirens across the territory, funded by a \$99,000 provision from the governor in the current fiscal year, no further monies for maintenance has been allocated in the FY 2025 budget. He also noted that the requested allocation from the emergency services fund was slated to be used for a number of purposes; equipment repairs, training the emergency communication center operators and continuing the transition from “Public Safety Answering Point Centers” to Next Generation 911. VITEMA will need additional financing outside of that funding source to replace aging furniture in the centers. In FY2024, \$100,000 was appropriated for that purpose.

Senator Franklin Johnson was concerned about VITEMA’s ability to “deliver service, especially going into this hurricane season” thanks to the constrained financial space it anticipates having to work with in the upcoming fiscal year. Like Sen. Frett-Gregory, he was additionally displeased about the VITMA team’s inability to answer several other questions posed, including accounting for increases for specific categories. “It seems as if VITEMA came here, gave us information and [are] not able to answer these questions,” Mr. Johnson chided.