

Image not found or type unknown

VIFEMS Seeks \$30.9 Million 2025 Budget With Focus on Hiring Personnel, Operational Improvements

Over 97% of the requested funds aimed at covering staffing costs as the department prioritizes increasing its workforce and enhancing emergency response capabilities

Senate / **Published On June 15, 2024 05:54 AM /**

Nelcia Charlemagne **June 15, 2024**

Image not found or type unknown



Two EMS ambulances on the Melvin Evans Highway. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

The V.I. Fire and Emergency Medical Services has requested a general fund appropriation of [\\$30,885,255](#) for the upcoming 2025 fiscal year. Of that amount, a whopping 97% is earmarked for personnel costs, with the remaining amount to account for “utilities, supplies and other services.”

VIFEMS was the first government entity to defend its budget before the Committee on Budget Appropriations and Finance during this year’s budget cycle. Director Antonio Stevens shared that

VIFEMS's budget will also include an appropriation of \$1.4 million from the Health Revolving Fund, if the Committee approves. The fund's source is ambulance fees collected by the Department of Health on behalf of VIFEMS.

Projections also forecast VIFEMS to receive another \$1.6 million in "non-appropriated funding" from two sources in FY2025: the Fire Emergency Medical Fund and the Emergency Services Fund. The first is built on fees collected for fire safety inspections and permits, as well as fines assessed for code violations. Mr. Stevens revealed that in FY2025, the fund is expected to amass \$851,805. VIFEMS also anticipates that \$795,471 will be available from the Emergency Services Fund.

VIFEMS is also "aggressively [pursuing]" competitive grants to augment local funding. In FY2025, the Service will have access to \$1,056,184 in awarded funds, including \$60,000 from the USDA Forestry Service for the purchase of Wildland firefighting supplies. Mr. Stevens explained that several grant applications are also pending and "may become available during the fiscal year." Grant funding will be available for the "repair, replacement and hardening of the fire stations," he anticipated.

Mr. Stevens outlined several strategic goals for the upcoming fiscal year - now just over three months away. Among them, the agency is looking to increase staffing, improve facilities, and establish a medical billing team. "As sufficient staffing is critical to our operations, increasing the number of fire and EMS personnel is one of our top priorities," he noted. VIFEMS currently needs 10 additional fire officers per district, 12 EMS territory-wide, and one extra administrative staffer. However, the Office of Management and Budget's FY2026 budget book only lists [13 funded vacancies](#) and new positions. VIFEMS says that OMB has promised them the appropriate number of vacancies.?

Like with last year's budget cycle, staffing woes are anticipated to remain a key issue for departments and agencies. "We didn't hire anyone for about nine years, and right now, what we're trying to do is close that gap," explained Mr. Stevens. As several fire officers retire from the service, VIFEMS has found itself paying out exorbitant overtime costs to maintain coverage. So far in FY2024, the Service has paid some \$2,756,879 in overtime. They anticipate another \$900,000 to be expended in the final quarter. It's funding that was not budgeted for in FY2024. "We'll have to discuss with OMB," admitted Mr. Stevens, though upcoming retirements could open up a new pot of money that would have otherwise gone into salaries.

Fire and EMS officers often gain overtime from providing essential service at public events including carnival celebrations. In reply to a query from committee chair Senator Donna Frett-Gregory, Director Stevens revealed that they receive no funding from the Tourism Revolving Fund for those purposes. It's something that the lawmaker suggested could be explored.?

Nonetheless, it was revelations like these that left lawmakers questioning whether the Virgin Islands Fire and Emergency Medical Services will have enough funding and personnel to effectively carry out its essential duties.

Observing that the proposal for FY2025 is roughly \$3 million less than the previous year, and includes a major personnel reduction, Ms. Frett-Gregory asked Mr. Stevens how a leaner budget could "impact your ability to perform." A large part of the year-on-year reduction, he noted, is caused by one-time appropriations made in FY 2024, including some \$1 million for the purchase of a fireboat. Otherwise, Mr. Stevens said that VIFEMS has made "adjustments elsewhere to keep operational."

