

Senate Scrutinizes PERB's Request for Extra \$220,000 for Restructuring and Training

Lawmakers express doubts about the necessity and allocation of additional funds sought by the Public Employees Relations Board

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A request for additional funding remains a common refrain as government departments and agencies continue to cycle through the Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance this budget cycle. The latest entity to appeal for more money from the government of the Virgin Islands was the Public Employees Relations Board.

Its chairperson, Pierina Jacobs Feldman, told lawmakers on Tuesday that while the PERB is “grateful for the governor’s recommended budget in the amount of \$1,466,909”, the entity will require an additional \$220,000 to fund changes associated with an ongoing restructuring. According to Ms. Feldman, the restructuring will “improve the function of the agency” by

ensuring staff are carrying out roles relevant to their job descriptions.?

Based on their planned structural change, PERB Executive Director Jessica Philgence contended that it is “imperative that we request an additional \$220,000 to ensure our agency is brought up to par with our sister agencies nationwide.” She reminded lawmakers that since the entity was established in the 1980s, there are more government employees and workers' unions to engage with. “Therefore there is a direct need to employ additional personnel,” she explained.

Ms. Philgence explained that the restructuring also heavily focuses on staff training. She said changing laws and the Covid-19 pandemic have necessitated ongoing training and development to ensure “decision makers are aware of these changes and keep in compliance with the rights of the employees.” PERB currently employs 10 people and intends to fill one full-time vacancy — a court reporter for St. Croix.

Lawmakers though, were doubtful that PERB could attract and retain a court reporter as a proposed salary of \$60,000. “The court reporter salaries are much higher than that,” committee chair Senator Donna Frett-Gregory informed officials after PERB admitted they had not investigated the average salary for the position. “You have to look at how realistic with what you're proposing, and how realistic it is for you to get the onboarding,” she noted, suggesting a contracted role instead of a full-time position. The same was suggested for PERB’s legal needs, for which they are currently considering adding a part-time attorney to staff.

From the \$220,00 in additionally requested funds, \$115,000 will go toward salaries and \$53,089 toward fringe benefits. Supplies, including new uniforms and items needed for network upgrades, will account for \$21,000. The PERB’s budget breakdown was built around their desired recommendation of \$1,686,909, including \$805,020 in total personnel costs, and \$339,241 for fringe benefits. The entity has earmarked \$26,424 for supplies, \$16,600 for utilities and \$279,624 for other services and charges.