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53 Dept. of Education Employees Brace for Layoffs Amid ARPA Fund Exhaustion

Education Commissioner Dr. Dionne Wells-Hedrington confirms that with the expiration of American Rescue Plan Act funding on September 30, the Department lacks local budget capacity to retain 53 employees hired under ARPA

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Dionne Wells-Hedrington at a Senate hearing on Mon. Sept. 9, 2024. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

Fifty-three individuals currently employed by the V.I. Department of Education are at risk of being made redundant as funding from the American Rescue Plan Act expires on September 30th. This information was confirmed by Education Commissioner Dr. Dionne Wells-

Hedrington, who testified before the Committee on Education and Workforce Development on Monday.

“There were some positions that were created under the ARPA funding. Once that funding source is gone, we do not have the capacity to sustain them on the local budget,” she explained. There are currently 113 VIDE staffers who have either been moved under the umbrella of ARPA funds, or were hired using the federal funding.

“We looked for possible vacancies that we could slide people into,” the commissioner said. “We’ve moved as many as we can over onto the local budget.” Among the 113 individuals were 53 “long-time employees that were initially hired on the general fund.” Priority was therefore given to shift them over to getting paid from the general fund once more. “A lot of our vacancies went to ensure that those individuals remain employed,” VIDE explained.

Of the 60 remaining employees, 7 have since resigned, but for the 53 others, Wells-Hedrington admitted that “unless there are some appropriations, we just can’t” retain them. “We had other positions that were created to support schools that the superintendents would love to keep, but I don’t have the local budget to sustain those positions at this time,” she explained.

?Though ARPA funds are set to expire on September 30th, the Department of Education says they are working to obligate monies by the deadline. VIDE still needs to encumber almost \$19 million, while almost \$6.9 million worth of projects are now at different levels of processing. The department is now working with its federal grants officer to encumber the remaining balance “in the next few weeks.”

“We know that it’s an uphill battle, but the team is working seven days a week, many hours into the nighttime. We believe it is possible. We are going to push and make it happen by or before September 30th, 2024,” stated Michal Rhymer-Browne, district director for federal grants.?

Among the planned uses for the ARPA funds are “de-escalation and conflict resolution training for staff and students,” and “pursuing more individual and family counseling.” “Behavioral health is an important part of our efforts with the ARPA funding,” said Dr. Sharlene Belton-Gonzalez, insular superintendent of the St. Croix district.

The Department of Education expects to be granted a liquidity extension of March 2026 by which ARPA funds must be expended. This extension will not change the reality that 53 individuals must now seek new employment under the current challenging economic conditions. Compounding the impact on the local economy, the same possibility exists – having to lay off dozens of employees – for other government departments and entities that currently use ARPA funding to pay staffers.