

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Unattractive Salaries at Department of Sports, Parks and Recreation Affecting Staff Retention

DSPR is struggling to retain employees on St. John due to low wages, forcing reliance on contractors and leaving key positions unfilled. Officials warn that inadequate pay is driving staff away, impacting operations and public safety.

Government / **Published On February 22, 2025 09:32 AM /**

Nelcia Charlemagne **February 22, 2025**



The Department of Sports, Parks, and Recreation is contending with staff shortages that make it difficult to fulfil its mandate, particularly on the island of St. John. The “inability to attract and retain energetic, qualified and dependable personnel” is described as a “major threat” to the department by its acting commissioner, Vincent Roberts.

Mr. Roberts appeared before the Committee on Culture, Youth, Aging, Sports and Parks on Friday to discuss matters pertinent to St. John. Currently, the St. John office has a complement of seven - one employee runs the office, three are responsible for maintenance – programming and facility upkeep, while three other workers handle recreation-related duties. According to Mr. Roberts, “salaries continue to be the biggest hurdle” when it comes to recruiting and retaining staff.

DSPR’s circumstances on St. John has forced the team to get creative. “Sometimes we have to rely on some of the local people that we know, contractors, or whoever we might be able, to get certain things done,” shared deputy commissioner Elroy Hill. “We try to subcontract a lot of stuff. We get a lot of stuff done outside the department,” Mr. Roberts added. The department reportedly needs at least two additional recreational staff and another groundsman.

Senator Novelle Francis, chair of the 36th Legislature’s Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance, pressed DSPR for answers on how they intend to “right fit the situation with your salaries.” Mr. Roberts said that he has encouraged his human resources manager to participate in union negotiations. “Any employee that we attain doesn’t stay because somebody [is] coming along and offering them more money. We’re losing them left and right.” Mr. Francis has advised DSPR to “be at the forefront to demand higher salaries for those individuals.”

Senator Alma Francis Heyliger, meanwhile, has suggested the DSPR consider “potential incentives” to recruit and retain staff. “A lot of time, folks come on and they’re excited about the job, and after the first two weeks and you get a first paycheck, I don’t think they anticipate the deduction,” Mr. Roberts admitted. “We lose some really great people, not because they want to leave, but because they have a family to feed.”

Even in positions that DSPR considers to be fairly remunerated, filling positions remain difficult. For example, there are no DSPR-employed lifeguards on St. John. “We have two openings right now for lifeguards,” Mr. Roberts told lawmakers. “We only had two people that qualified, and none of them showed up for the interview.” The department’s efforts in that regard have come to naught. “We try to advertise. We try to promote. The lifeguard pays a lot more than grounds and maintenance, so we were assuming that would be a position that would attract more people, but it didn’t,” lamented Mr. Roberts. The lifeguard salary on offer is \$40,000.

Committee chair Senator Angel Bolques Jr. found the situation vexing, as “we’ve seen a number of drownings happen,” he remarked. The at-large senator says he has already initiated conversations with the National Park Services who employs lifeguards, and is open to “collaborating with the department.”

Meanwhile, lawmakers have encouraged the department to include additional staffing costs in their FY26 budget request which will be heard before the Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance in the coming months.