

The Virgin Islands Consortium

CTE Scholarship Funding in Limbo as Board Slams Lack of Communication from Finance Department

Board members say they can't promise students scholarships with no confirmation of funding. With the application deadline approaching, CTE officials criticize budget shifts, lack of transparency, and the strain on technical education programs.

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During Wednesday's meeting of the V.I. Board of Career and Technical Education, members learned that despite applications in the pipeline, the timeline for announcing scholarships this year is up in the air due to a lack of funding for the awards.

"I've requested for the last two months," said Anton Döös III, the board's executive director. "Funding has not been released and it really doesn't make much sense to tell a kid you're going to get a scholarship if we do not know if that money ever gets released."

Mr. Döös noted that the extended deadline for applications is June 15. Once the application window has closed, the board will review those received and make a decision on who will be granted funding – should CTE ever receive it.

"Still no response from [the V.I. Department of] Finance regarding a separate scholarship fund?" asked board chair Joann Murphy. "They're playing games," she remarked, noting that "they included the scholarship money into our regular funding as opposed to separating it out as usual."

Board member Michael François corrected her assessment. "Technically they took away the scholarship money," he asserted, explaining that the elimination of the scholarship fund did not coincide with a simultaneous increase in the amount allocated for general expenses. "Basically, they took the scholarship away from us and want us to use our regular funding to give out scholarships, which is not the deal," he underscored.

Mr. François said the lack of forthrightness among members of central government's finance team was unprofessional. "Just tell us you don't have the scholarship money, and then the board and Mr. Döös and all of us could have made a decision and go from there," he declared.

It was noted that this issue was one of those which would be highlighted during an upcoming Senate hearing in which a board representative has been invited to testify. Mr. Döös suggested that while a request for funding for CTE should be included in that testimony, "I doubt that we'll get any of it...as I can tell, this government is in tight screws at the moment."

He noted that during the last fiscal year central government released the additional scholarship funds in dribs and drabs. "By June, we had enough to give a couple of scholarships out. This time around, unfortunately, they have not indicated any funding for it," Mr. Döös indicated.

Anthony Mardenborough Jr., the newest member of the CTE Board, reminded fellow members of his experience during a Senate committee hearing earlier this year. "We go before the Legislature and we give them updates...and then it becomes this backlash forum where they're backlashing on every single thing that we're not doing, but not realizing that we can't really do everything that is required when you basically cut our hands off."

He expressed hope that the upcoming hearing could be used to make a clearer case for why CTE could not continue to operate while being starved of necessary funds.

Mr. Döös complained – not for the first time – of the manner in which the agency's funding is distributed. He strongly suggested moving to quarterly disbursements instead of monthly. "Let us deposit this check into our own account and then audit us at the end of the year, so that we are not standing like fools who promise kids scholarships and then don't have the funding to do anything."

The importance of having local government funding mechanisms working efficiently and effectively was underscored by ex-officio member Monique Faulkner, who pointed out that looming federal cuts and the shifting of more and more responsibility from federal to state administrations, means that “governments are...going to be held accountable for picking up some of the cuts that's going to impact some of the more vulnerable residents.”

She recommended the formation of a cross-agency working group that would streamline services and create more efficiency in the delivery of career and technical education in the territory. “I think that there's a lot of strengthening that can be done,” Faulkner asserted. “A collaboration needs to be had now more than ever...We need to look at what is the in-demand career pathways, the hard-to-fill jobs in the United States Virgin Islands, and we need to be focusing on building our workforce.”

With effective collaboration between agencies, including the Department of Labor, the Department of Human Services, and the Housing Authority, she argued, the CTE board could finally start seeing the results it has been struggling to achieve.