

USVI Faces 7,000-Worker Shortage Amid Construction Boom, Putting Federal Billions at Risk

Officials say the territory needs 7,000 more workers to fulfill the demands of its \$23 billion federal infrastructure agenda, as lawmakers lament missed opportunities to train locals and federal barriers block overseas labor solutions.

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The Government of the Virgin Islands is relying on a strong construction push to continue obligating federal funds. This should also allow for the collection of a substantial increase in gross receipts and excise taxes and the rehabilitation of several key pieces of infrastructure. However, manpower shortages remain a massive challenge.

The need for boots on the ground was once again discussed when the governor's financial team presented the FY2026 Budget Overview before the Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance on Tuesday.

With potentially \$23 billion in federal funds available, "we would need 7,000 workforce employees outside of the existing population," explained Adrienne Williams-Octalien, director of the Office of Disaster Recovery.

In 2024, Governor Albert Bryan Jr. [floated the idea](#) of lobbying for changes in the requirements for the issuance of H1B work visas. If successful, it would be the territory's golden ticket to securing construction workers from countries outside of the U.S.A. According to Mr. Bryan, in December 2024, the government was "already in contact with contractors in Central America — more specifically Colombia — for workers." The ever-fluid political landscape on the mainland, however, has thrown a wrench in that plan.

"As you can see, the current environment in the U.S., importing somebody is a no-no right now," remarked Julio Rhymer, director of the Office of Management and Budget on Tuesday. He reminded lawmakers that the best interim solution is upskilling. "What we really need to focus on is developing a workforce, going back to the basics such as the electricians, plumbers, carpenters," he noted. "Of course, Director Octalien would like to go out and spend a billion dollars, but you don't have the workforce."

"There's a lot to be done but there's a gap from the very beginning that it's pretty much unattainable with our existing population," concurred Ms. Williams-Octalien. "We're really at a deficit and we will need more than what we have."

This refrain has been sung for years prior, however. Senator Milton Potter believes that greater effort could have been made to better position the territory's workforce ahead of the flood of federal funding.

"It's not to blame anybody," he began. "The hurricanes took place in 2017, and if we anticipated the workforce that we will need to rebuild this place — we can't import everybody — we could have put a dent," he argued. "Even if we produced, I don't know, 5% of what we needed on an annual basis, over an eight-year period, we would have put a significant dent."

In the meantime, how the territory plans to solve its chronic labor shortage in the short term remains a thorny question with no immediate solution.