

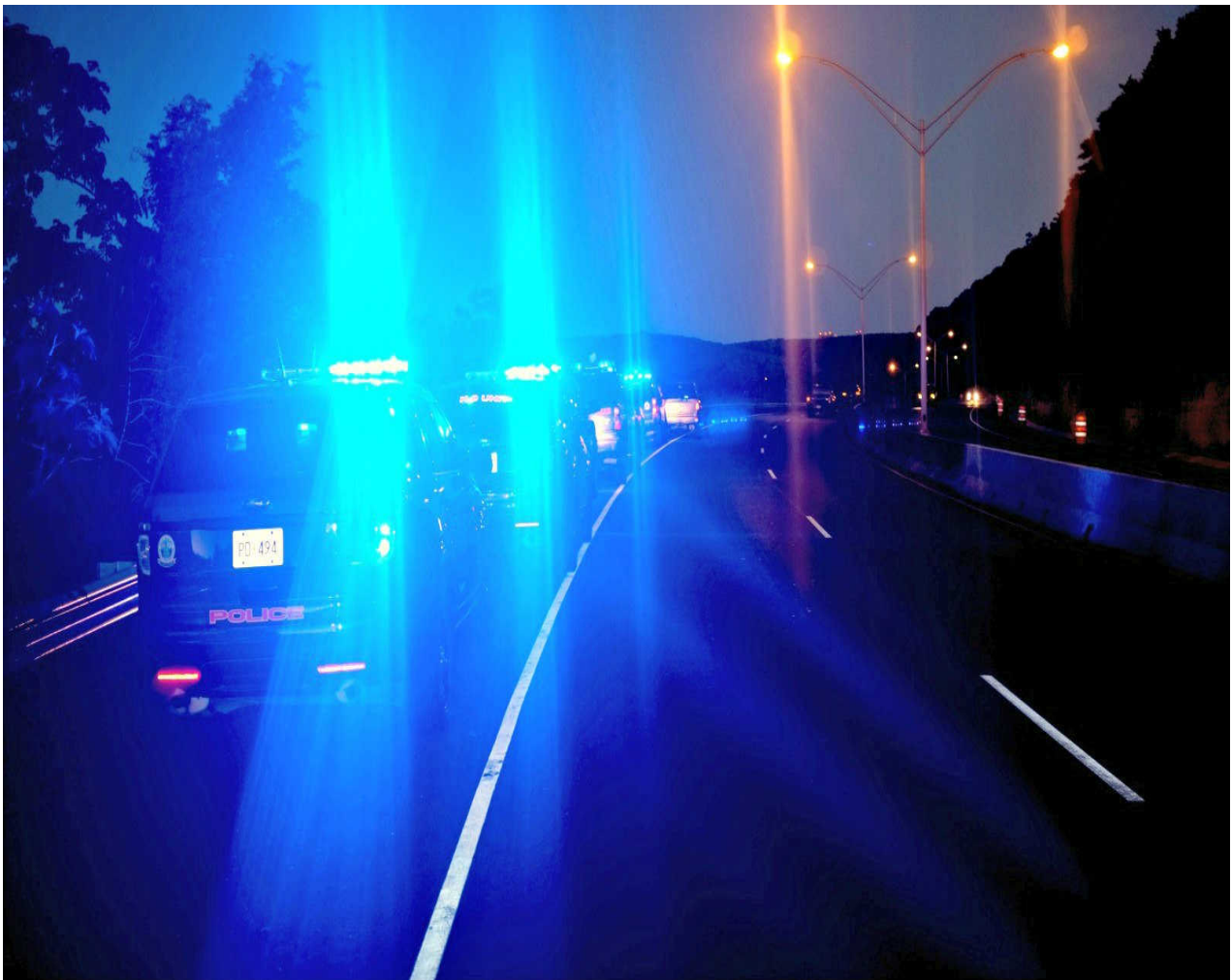
The Virgin Islands Consortium

GVI Files Legal Action Against Police Union as VIPD Manpower Crisis Deepens in St. Thomas-St. John

The Virgin Islands Government is seeking a court injunction against the police union, citing an unlawful job action that disrupted patrols, school safety, and investigations; the union blames expired contracts, low pay, and burnout among officers.

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VIPD Units on St. Croix. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM.

The Government of the Virgin Islands has filed a complaint in the Superior Court against the Police Benevolent Association (PBA) and unnamed members of its bargaining unit, accusing them of participating in an unlawful job action that has crippled police

operations in the St. Thomas-St. John District. The filing seeks an emergency temporary restraining order and permanent injunction to halt what it characterizes as a strike in violation of territorial law.

Filed on June 17, the lawsuit outlines a cascade of officer absences that began June 15 and severely disrupted public safety coverage, including shifts at festivals, schools, traffic enforcement, and patrol duties.

According to VIPD Commissioner Mario Brooks, who submitted a sworn affidavit included in the complaint, the department was “severely handicapped” beginning Sunday, June 15, when several scheduled officers in both St. Thomas and St. John called out sick across multiple shifts. The absences extended into Monday and impacted critical units, including the Criminal Investigations Bureau, Special Operations Bureau, School Security, and Traffic Investigations Bureau.

On June 16 alone, all seven school security officers and all five members of the Traffic Investigations Bureau called out sick. Mr. Commissioner Brooks noted that the strike forced the department to reassign supervisors and even peace officers from other agencies just to “prevent complete catastrophe” due to inadequate staffing.

An internal VIPD communication, issued on behalf of the Chief of Police, underscored the severity of the staffing crisis. “Due to the current manpower shortage of Officers on Military, Annual and Sick Leave, effective immediately all days off are hereby cancelled until further notice,” the message read.

The Department of Justice argues that the collective absences constitute a deliberate work stoppage prohibited under the Public Employees Relations Act. VIPD officers are classified as Class III employees under the collective bargaining agreement, which prohibits strikes in roles deemed essential to public health and safety. The government alleges that the union’s actions amount to a breach of contract, a violation of territorial statute, and a failure to bargain in good faith. The agreement, which expired on September 30, 2023, is a bone of contention for the disgruntled officers as their salary increments, uniform allowances, and other benefits have reportedly ceased since its expiration.

The complaint cites an internal union memo from PBA President Joel Browne Connors, sent to members on June 15, in which he acknowledges conversations with Governor Albert Bryan Jr. and senior officials. In the memo, Connors relays the government’s directive that officers return to duty, stating, “the administration is requesting that all officers return to duty immediately, with the understanding that you will receive nothing beyond your regular paycheck because, as they stated, ‘it is your job.’” However, he added, “I stand behind your actions. You have shown strength, unity, and purpose. You are making a difference.”

In an earlier interview with the Consortium on June 16, Connor denied that a formal strike had been called but acknowledged that officers were out on sick, military, and annual leave. “Some officers have called in sick, I know some officers are off,” he said, also pointing to low morale, burnout, and an expired collective bargaining agreement as contributing factors. “I know the officers [are] overworked, they’re burned out... We’re making \$19 an hour, and that’s not acceptable,” he stated.

Connor also disclosed to the Consortium that he had met recently with Governor Bryan, who acknowledged that step increases are owed to officers and that a new collective bargaining agreement is in progress. "Conversations have been had; we're just waiting for something in writing," Connor said. While denying union endorsement of the sick-out, he urged officers to resume duty: "We do not condone any sick-out and we ask them to go back to work, hoping that the government upholds the standard and agrees to give them the increase that they're asking for," he told the Consortium.

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