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Senators Demand Urgency from VITEMA as \$500K Cybersecurity Grant Sits Idle, Emergency Funding Threatened

With critical homeland security funds underused and tsunami preparedness grants delayed, VITEMA is under fire for poor grant execution, bureaucratic inertia, and risking federal clawbacks amid heightened cyber threats.

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As budget hearings progress, the Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance continues urging government agencies to adopt austerity measures and fully utilize federal funds before they expire—especially in light of recent policy changes under the Trump administration that increase the risk of unspent funds being clawed back.

That risk is a central concern for the leadership of the V.I. Territorial Emergency Management Agency (VITEMA), which appeared before the committee on Tuesday to present its FY2026 budget request. Director Daryl Jaschen warned lawmakers that “changes to the federal grant programs are forthcoming, particularly in the FEMA grants.” VITEMA relies on just over \$1.38 million in federal grants to cover wages for at least 16 employees.

These funds, however, “may vanish in 2026 fiscal year or 2027 fiscal year, with little or no notice,” shared Mr. Jaschen.

In the interim, VITEMA continues to manage several grants – over \$4.2 million worth for FY2026 budget, according to the agency's budget request. Among these is a security grant “dedicated to enhancing physical and cybersecurity, as well as other security measures for nonprofit and faith-based organizations at high risk of terrorist or extremist attacks.” VITEMA has not yet spent the over \$500,000 in funds attached to that grant, which was received in 2022 and expires in November 2026. The non-expenditure of that grant piqued lawmakers’ interest.

How and when the money is spent is the responsibility of a Cyber Security Council chaired by Rupert Ross, director of the Bureau of Information Technology. “I’m on that council and we have plans right now to spend that money,” stated Mr. Jaschen, but his answer failed to satisfy Senator Kurt Violet.

“I could find a lot of ways that we could spend the money to protect the Virgin Islands,” Mr. Violet said, referencing recent cyberattacks on both hospitals and the V.I. Lottery. “We’re losing money because we are not pushing. We got to spend every federal dollar allocated to the Virgin Islands,” he pleaded. Committee chair Senator Novelle Francis agreed. “It’s very important that we again take night and make day, but we have to spend these federal monies,” he urged.

VITEMA’s responses, however, spoke to an almost crippling level of bureaucracy that hinders the rapid expenditure of those funds. “We have to remember that Department of Homeland Security grants are very strict,” said Florecita Brunn, VITEMA’s grants manager. Senator Kenneth Gittens was not convinced, however. He was instead concerned that VITEMA would “just let the money sit there. We already had agencies hacked.” Mr. Jaschen indicated, however, that the grant funds are “really for assessments and then putting measures in to prevent.”

“While Rome burns we continue to wait...At what point do we see the urgency in activating this council so that the necessary protections be put in place?” wondered Sen. Francis. The Council’s next meeting has been scheduled for “mid-July”, according to Mr. Jaschen. “We are being hacked on a regular basis. We have funds sitting for years and nothing is being done,” lamented Senator Marvin Blyden.

Later on in the meeting, Senator Kurt Violet later raised the issue of the unspent cybersecurity grant once more. After some on-the-spot research, he had reportedly discovered that the goal of the grant program is to “assist state and local and tribal governments with managing and reducing systemic cyber risk.” It was Mr. Violet’s assumption, therefore, that the funds could be used to support affected agencies. “Why haven’t there been an emergency meeting of the Council to be able to submit an application to utilize those funds to better protect the Government of the Virgin Islands?” he asked.

“Juan F. Luis still using paper, can’t catch themselves yet. We have \$500,000 we could use for cybersecurity and nothing has been spent...I don’t want to hear this trick anymore because the grant is very clear, is to deter cyber attacks,” Violet asserted.

Approaching the matter from a different angle, Senator Franklin Johnson wondered whether the grant funds could be used as a reimbursement. Florecita Brunn, VITEMA's grant manager, was unable to respond. "It would have to go in front of the council and it'll be dependent on what's in the plan that's authorized," she told him. Noting that entities like the V.I. Lottery have expended their own funds to rebuild, he encouraged VITEMA to "reimburse them so they could use their money to do other things."

According to Mr. Jaschen, the Council last met "before Christmas." Gittens was not amused. "I'll check with Director Ross. This isn't making sense to me. We gotta get these monies spent," he said.

But the cybersecurity grant is not VITEMA's only sticking point. The agency is also contending with the "uncertain future of the tsunami and earthquake program funding." According to Mr. Jaschen, "this funding instability threatens our ability to maintain the momentum we've built in tsunami awareness and earthquake preparedness programs." With only four more months in the fiscal year, VITEMA has not yet received the FY2025 grant from the federal government. Several other grants will expire before the fiscal year ends.

The just over \$4 million in grants VITEMA is counting on to supplement its budget represents more than a 12% decrease in the category from the previous year. Apart from federal support, VITEMA is also requesting a general fund allocation of \$5,911,126. From that allocation, \$3,259,756 will be used for personnel expenses, while \$1,600,134 is attached to fringe benefits. Other services are budgeted at \$575,691, and supplies will cost \$83,056. Utilities are expected to cost \$392,489. Meanwhile, the federal dollars will cover personnel and fringe expenses to the tune of \$930,344 and \$452,887, respectively. It also covers vacancies to the tune of \$417,000.32 as well as the associated benefits of \$207,716. Several other categories are budgeted against the federal funds.

With those plans in place, VITEMA must now hold onto hope that the federal funding the agency budgeted for will actually materialize when the time comes.