

The Virgin Islands Consortium

VIFEMS Overtime Surges Amid Staffing Crisis, Lawmakers Press for Sustainable Solutions

With overtime already exceeding \$3.5 million—more than double the budgeted \$1.7 million—officials cite paramedic shortages, training demands, and reliance on dual-role EMTs as lawmakers question how FY2025 obligations will be met without new funding.

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Recent VIFEMS training.

Staffing shortages have led the V.I. Fire and Emergency Medical Services to spend more than twice the amount originally budgeted for overtime pay. During Tuesday's budget hearing before the Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance, lawmakers

focused on exploring potential solutions to the escalating costs.

Responding to a question from committee chair Senator Novelle Francis, VIFEMS' chief financial officer, Charmaine Akers-Hewlett, indicated that over \$3.5 million has been spent on overtime to date. With a quarter of the year remaining, this amount is more than twice the approximately \$1.7 million budgeted for overtime.

"It's no secret that with Pafford, for example, pulling out of the territory, placed all of our paramedics and our EMS personnel into basically overtime response," explained Antonio Stevens, VIFEMS' director. "Currently in St. Croix district we have no paramedics." Therefore, the EMS chief and EMS supervisor "are constantly doing those advanced calls, running paramedics." In St. Thomas/St. John, Mr. Stevens says there are only 6 paramedics. "We do need to run some overtime in order to make sure that those employees who are putting in that time are compensated appropriately," noted the director.

VIFEMS has also paid out overtime to staff members who operated as instructors during a recently concluded EMS training course. "We don't have a cadre that just sits down and wait until a class come up. So those employees who assist work overtime," Mr. Stevens explained.

Sen. Francis has urged VIFEMS to "determine exactly where the overtime is accrued" to better manage spending moving forward. "You're slated to spend \$4.41 million for FY 2025," the senator calculated. Where are you getting that funding from?"

"Sorry, can't answer that question," Ms. Akers-Hewlett admitted.

Mr. Stevens, however, was more hopeful. On St. Croix, 12 individuals recently graduated as both firefighters and EMTs. "With the graduating of this class of 12 dual role employees, that will help us to at least add in three more persons per shift," he noted. Another class of 13 individuals will begin on June 30th and are projected to graduate in October.

"I still think that you're going to run into a predicament where you're short into the fiscal year and we'll have to probably consider a supplemental — once it can be justified," replied Francis.

As far as paramedic staffing goes, VIFEMS is facing a different predicament: there are only two individuals able to provide paramedic services on the entire island St. Croix. "That's a very dangerous situation," declared Senator Kurt Vialet. "We're going to lose individuals if we don't have paramedics." There is a need for at least 7 more paramedics in St. Croix. The lawmaker encouraged Virgin Islanders to explore that field. "There were more paramedics from Pafford than we had on the island. That's a shame. So when we [cut that contract](#), we lost all of the paramedics," he noted.

According to Robert Bryan, EMS Chief, the interest exists. "A lot of the recent graduates from other EMT programs are all fully involved and want to move to the paramedic level," he noted. There are at least 5 individuals on St. Croix and 3 more on St. Thomas who want to become paramedics. The course of training can last between 9 and 12 months and cost approximately \$10,000. In years past, VIFEMS, Love City Strong, and other entities have footed that cost.

However, VIFEMS cannot currently afford to pay for the interested individuals to train as paramedics. Mr. Stevens apprised lawmakers of another challenge: even among those who may have expressed interest in the certification, “finding the employee that wants to go away for nine months, away from the family, away from the territory, away from the support system to complete that training,” Mr. Stevens explained.

“We have to be able to set up the opportunity,” Mr. Violet countered. “If we get two to go it is two more than we have and we’ll support it.”

To provide its critical services in the upcoming fiscal year, VIFEMS is requesting \$35,224,463 from the general fund. Personnel services account for the largest portion, \$24,591,270. Associated fringe benefits will cost \$9,930,005. Other services are projected to cost \$215,713, while utilities are budgeted at \$470,475. Supplementary federal grants total \$941,314, officials apprised lawmakers.