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Former Police Chief Shot on Duty Sues GVI For Halting Disability Pay Despite Court Order

Former St. Croix Police Chief Christopher Howell, who was shot twice while responding to an armed robbery in 2012, has filed suit against the V.I. gov't and other agencies, accusing them of violating a 2019 court order restoring his disability benefits.

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former VIPD police chief Christopher Howell.

A former VIPD police chief is suing the Government of the Virgin Islands, the V.I. Police Department, and other named defendants, for violating a previous court decision mandating that he continue to receive disability payments for an injury sustained in the line of duty.

According to court records, Christopher Howell joined the VIPD in 1992, and by 2011 had risen through the ranks to become the St. Croix Police Chief. In this position, he earned \$93,000 as his annual base salary.

In August 2012, Mr. Howell responded to a reported armed robbery in progress. As he and other officers tried to subdue the suspects, the St. Croix police chief was shot twice by an assault rifle; once in the lower back and again in the left forearm.

The gunshot wounds, according to the civil complaint, “rendered him unfit to serve as a police officer and so qualified him for duty-connected disability payment pursuant to 3 VIC §584a.” According to the law, Mr. Howell was reportedly due his full annual salary as disability pay.

Everything was fine until 2016, the complaint notes. Mr. Howell was receiving the payments as expected and the government, through the Division of Worker's Compensation, covered the bills for his ongoing medical treatment. In March 2016, however, Mr. Howell was summarily demoted to police sergeant, and his annual salary – and thus the amount he received as disability pay – was reduced commensurately. Objecting to the unilateral reassignment, Mr. Howell sought the intervention of the court. The Superior Court agreed with him, and in 2019 ordered that his original salary be reinstated “unless and until his duty-connected disability benefits have ceased pursuant to statute,” and awarded damages.

However, some time in that same year, the lawsuit claims, compensation for his medical expenses suddenly stopped. “Howell did not receive any notice or explanation” about the cessation of payments, the complaint states. At the time, Mr. Howell had not yet reached the \$750,000 statutory cap for such payments either.

In 2022, Mr. Howell reached an agreement with then-VIPD Commissioner Ray Martinez. The injured police chief would receive the retroactive payment of a college degree salary differential that was due to him, in exchange for him obtaining a “professionally prepared disability assessment and care/vocational plan.” This was necessary, according to Mr. Martinez, so that he could ensure Mr. Howell's payments, “based on the disability assessment and care/vocational plan,” the complaint alleges.

Mr. Howell submitted the plan the following year, however the lawsuit claims that the government's side of the bargain was never upheld. In 2024, newly appointed Commissioner Mario Brooks wrote to Mr. Howell to inform that an assessment would be scheduled to determine his fitness for duty. That assessment was set for February 17 2025, but did not occur for various reasons. Mr. Brooks wrote again in June acknowledging the court's earlier order that his payments be reinstated, but scheduling another assessment for July. Mr. Howell told the new Commissioner that he would not attend an evaluation in the Virgin Islands due to the “serious personal risk” traveling to the territory would entail. He followed up with messages from his treatment providers expressing the same sentiments, and requested that the VIPD designate a practitioner outside the Virgin Islands to conduct the assessment.

There was no response to that request from VIPD, and this September, Mr. Howell's payments stopped once again. Commissioner Brooks stopped responding to correspondence, and a request to the Division of Worker's Compensation for a copy of Mr. Howell's case file has been met with silence thus far.

Mr. Howell has accused the named defendants – Government of the Virgin Islands, Department of Labor, Division of Workers Compensation, Virgin Islands Police Department, Mario Brooks and Raymond Martinez – with contempt of court for ignoring the judgement of April 2019, violating

the law stipulating the provision of disability payments, and negligence. He asks the court to declare that the Division of Worker's Compensation is statutorily required to pay for the medical treatment required as a result of him being shot and injured on the job. Mr. Howell is also seeking damages as a result of the halted payments.

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