

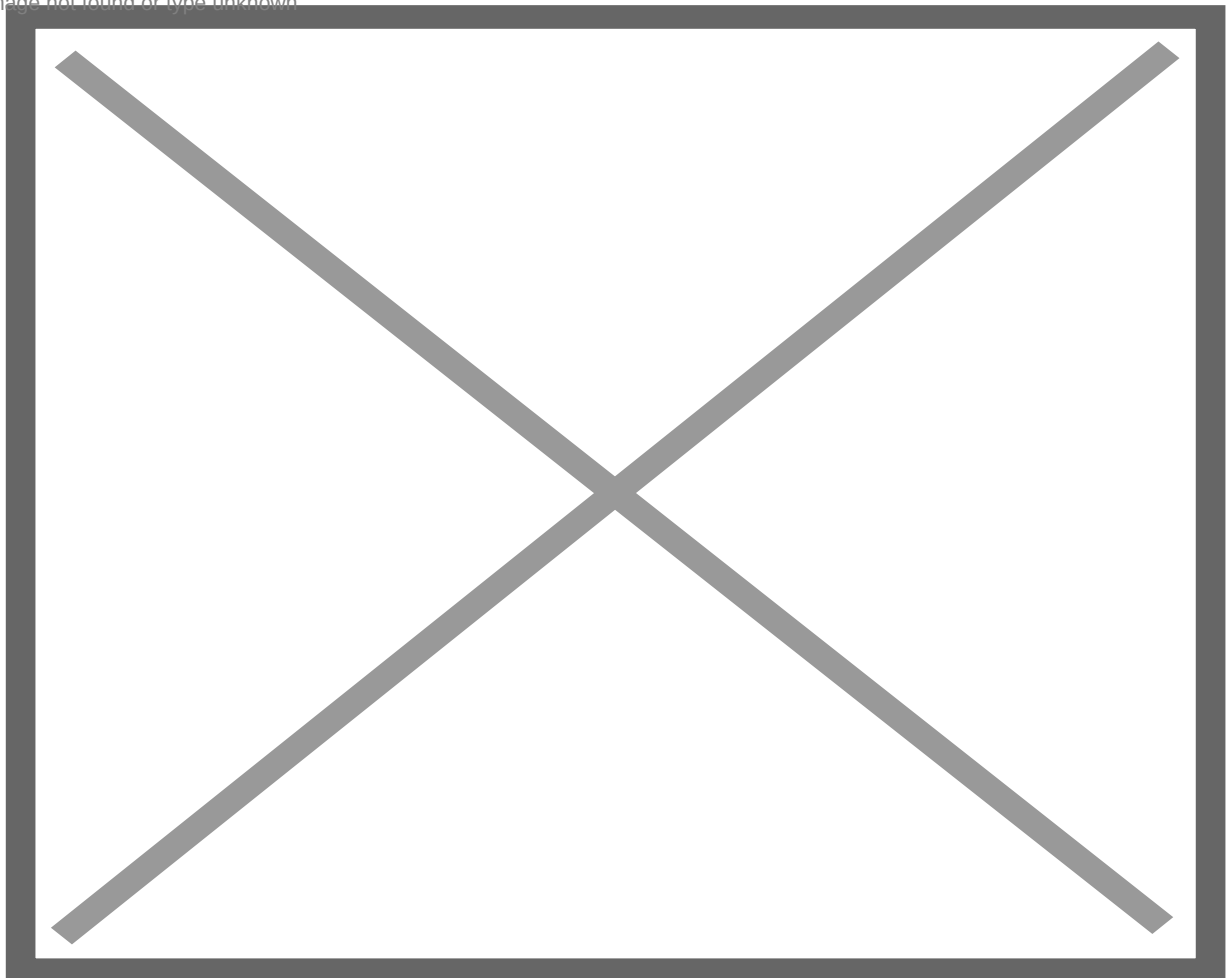
Firefighter Protective Gear Exceeds 10-Year Mark as Senators Raise Safety Concerns and Urge Immediate Replacement

VIFEMS leadership confirmed some firefighter protective equipment is more than 10 years old, meeting the National Fire Protection Agency replacement threshold, as lawmakers questioned PFAs exposure and urged the agency to prioritize gear replacement.

Government / **Published On February 16, 2026 06:51 AM /**

Nelcia Charlemagne **February 16, 2026**

Image not found or type unknown



The ageing personal protective equipment used by local firefighters came under scrutiny from the Committee on Homeland Security, Justice, and Public Safety on Friday.

Senator Angel Bolques Jr. was interested in how old the gear was, as well as whether they contain polyfluoroalkyl, a group of synthetic chemicals, some of which repel heat. Also known as PFAs,

some research shows that increased exposure could lead to some forms of cancer.

Antonio Stevens, the director of the V.I. Fire and Emergency Services, did not provide clarity on that question but shared that “the gear is over 10 years old for the older firefighters.” There are, he added, “some older firefighters in the St. Thomas/St. John that are in need of gear.” Though aged, the gear remains operational, Mr. Stevens said.

Senator Kenneth Gittens was distressed by the admission. “My heart dropped when you say 10 years for those type of equipment,” he told Stevens.

Earlier in the conversation, VIFEMS’s leadership indicated that they would begin pursuing grant funding to hire additional personnel. Sen. Gittens believed, however, that grants would be more useful for equipment replacement. “Grants for hiring is one thing, but when these grants expire, then what happens?”

“Let’s focus on that with the grants,” he advised, referring to PPE replacement.

The National Fire Protection Agency recommends that equipment be replaced after ten years. VIFEMS, as disclosed by Mr. Stevens, is already at that mark. According to VIFEMS Chief Financial Officer Charmaine Akers-Hewlett, applications will be submitted when new, relevant grants reopen.

Senator Gittens believes those efforts are late. “We already dropped off the cliff. We supposed to have the money already to replace them,” he stated. He confronted VIFEMS with the possibility that they may not secure the grant that they intend to apply for. “We have to stay ahead of the curve on these things so that we don’t fall off,” he said.

Replacing and retrofitting firefighting equipment is one of VIFEMS’s many priorities. The recent [acquisition of 7 ambulances](#) is expected to replace some of the aged fleet and complement the remaining ones. Several fire stations are included in a project bundle expected to “start within the next five years.” In the interim, however, the men and women on the frontline must be equipped with safe and effective protection to continue serving the firefighting needs of the territory.