

The Virgin Islands Consortium

GERs Warns Justice Department Over Nearly \$170,000 in Rent Arrears as Dawson Says Late Payments Cannot Continue

GERs Administrator Angel Dawson Jr. said the DOJ's first-quarter arrears have reached almost \$170,000, warning that the pension system will try one more cooperative approach before becoming more aggressive and raising the matter before Senate Finance.

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The Government Employees' Retirement System is again facing problems collecting timely rental payments from the V.I. Department of Justice, with Administrator Angel Dawson Jr. telling trustees during the system's monthly meeting that arrears have

climbed to almost \$170,000 during the first quarter of the year.

"I must report to this board that the Department of Justice is a growing problem," Mr. Dawson said, describing the situation as one GERS can no longer overlook. "This is unacceptable and unsustainable," he declared, while emphasizing that the system has so far attempted to avoid confrontation.

According to Mr. Dawson, GERS has "been very courteous and cooperative with our tenant...and we certainly don't want to be involved in a legal imbroglio with the government's legal arm." Still, he made clear that the Department of Justice's status as a government agency does not change its obligation as a tenant.

"They're also a tenant, and we will not be accepting this continued late payments disarray from the Department of Justice," he told trustees. Mr. Dawson said GERS would make one more cooperative effort before moving toward "more aggressive in our collection efforts."

"Via this means and others," Mr. Dawson declared, "the Department of Justice is placed on notice."

Mr. Dawson confirmed that the rental contract includes provisions for fees and penalties tied to late payments. When asked whether the payment issues could affect future lease renewal discussions, he responded forcefully.

"And the choir says 'Amen'," Mr. Dawson said, vowing that "this is going to be the feature of our discussions with that tenant."

He acknowledged that the payment delays may not rest solely with the Department of Justice. Because DOJ is a central government department, Mr. Dawson said "this may be a systemic issue with the Department of Finance or the Office of Management and Budget, or the Department of Justice itself, or all three." But regardless of where the breakdown is occurring, he stressed that the burden should not fall on GERS.

"It's not our problem...it's for them to resolve," he said.

Mr. Dawson also told trustees that the issue will be raised during the system's upcoming annual overview before the Senate Finance Committee. "Ultimately, it is the Legislature's responsibility to provide proper funding for the central government and to know the truth with regards to what is happening."

Pointing to recent efforts that helped the V.I. Water and Power Authority collect payments through the consolidation of government payees into a single payer utility fund, Mr. Dawson suggested that a similar structure may be needed for government rental obligations.

"Maybe it's time for a single payer rental fund for the central government," he said.

While assuring trustees that GERS will "attempt to assist as best as possible," Mr. Dawson emphasized that cooperation does not erase the government's responsibility to meet its obligations. "At the end of the day, that does not absolve them of their responsibilities," he said.

Mr. Dawson also noted that other government departments that had previously carried arrears have either fully caught up or are now very close to being current.

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