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Dept. of Health Has Not Transferred Ambulance Funds to VIFEMS for Three Years, Lawmakers Told; Bryan Asked to Intervene

Lawmakers learned VIFEMS has not received ambulance-billing funds from its DOH partnership despite managing ambulance services for three years, prompting senators to demand invoices, executive action and an agreement so EMS can collect what it is owed.

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A Virgin Islands EMS ambulance travels along Center Line Road, Queen Mary Highway, between Sion Farm and Peter's Rest on St. Croix. Lawmakers questioned why VIFEMS has not received ambulance billing funds. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM.

Senator Marise James is publicly asking Governor Albert Bryan Jr. to intervene in the partnership between the Department of Health and the V.I. Fire and Emergency Medical Services, after lawmakers learned that VIFEMS has not received funds being collected on its behalf for ambulance calls.

The issue surfaced during VIFEMS's budget hearing on Monday, when Senator Kurt Vialet raised questions about billing for ambulance calls. Lawmakers learned that VIFEMS is still working through the process of conducting billing on its own and remains dependent on the Department of Health to transfer a portion of the funds under an existing agreement.

When Sen. Vialet asked whether those funds had been received, Chief Financial Officer Charmaine Akers-Hewitt replied "not as yet."

VIFEMS has been managing ambulance services for three years and, according to the discussion, should have been continuously collecting funding during that period. Vialet expressed frustration with the lack of clarity.

"Up to now, you don't have any firm agreement as to how much money you're supposed to get," he stated.

Mr. Vialet also questioned how VIFEMS continues to stock its ambulances. Director Antonio Stevens said the agency uses "collections that we make elsewhere."

For Senator Vialet, that was "wrong." He also questioned whether VIFEMS knows how much money it is owed.

When VIFEMS fully onboards its own collection company, the agency will be entitled to 7% of the collections. Senator Marise James, who participated in the formulation of the agreement, said the same arrangement should currently apply with the Department of Health.

"It's a little awkward knowing that three years have gone by and that hasn't happened," she said.

Senator Novelle Francis also expressed disappointment after learning that no one within VIFEMS had been keeping account of how much is owed.

"You can't even come to the table with the Department of Health. They can just give you whatever they feel that they want to pass on to you," he lamented.

Mr. Francis encouraged VIFEMS to establish the cost of an ambulance run and "send them an invoice for that amount so that they could start to pay down, or at least they have documentation of what is owed."

Further questioning revealed that VIFEMS completes approximately 6,000 to 7,000 ambulance runs annually, at \$400 each. Senator Vialet calculated the figure.

"So you have \$2.4 million that you should come to Fire Service that you have not received in the last three years."

Stevens told Senator Vialet that VIFEMS has not formally requested the funding.

"I don't have a reason for not requesting the funding," he said.

That response further frustrated Mr. Vialet.

“You're providing a service; you must be compensated. It can't be three years. You are not supposed to be using your monies for pharmaceuticals.”

Senator Violet called for a “high-level meeting from the executive branch” to address the matter, declining to describe the arrangement as a functioning partnership.

Senator Francis said he also plans to act.

"It's unfair. It's clearly unfair. I will be penning a letter in respect to this, because we've been at this for three years.”

“We'll champion the fight for you,” he declared.

Senator Hubert Frederick also weighed in.

“It's really woefully unfair to the Fire Service, but I'll let the cabinet members deal with that,” he said.

For Senator James, the person best positioned to ensure that the partnership between VIFEMS and DOH functions properly is Governor Bryan.

“We need to recognize the power of the Governor of the Virgin Islands,” she stated.

Senator James agreed that VIFEMS should send an invoice to the Department of Health, but said she wanted to “publicly ask the Governor of the Virgin Islands to let's get this agreement in place, so that EMS can collect.”

Other financial issues raised during the hearing included overtime, with VIFEMS continuing to face high costs. Director Stevens said the agency cannot avoid the expense.

In FY2026, VIFEMS spent \$5,979,482 on overtime payments. This year, the agency has already spent \$4,061,249, with three months remaining before the end of the fiscal year.

Although VIFEMS is above budget on overtime, Director Stevens told Senator Angel Bolques Jr. that the agency is doing a “good job” managing those costs. Senator Violet later noted that overtime spending is comparable to “almost half” of the amount set aside for salaries and fringe benefits.

During the hearing, Stevens testified that VIFEMS’s FY2027 General Fund request is \$34,318,681, with 99% of those funds dedicated to personnel costs.

VIFEMS also expects to earn \$782,879 for its Fire Service Emergency Fund, which includes monies collected through inspections and permits. Like the Department of Health, VIFEMS is entitled to a portion of the Fire Service Emergency Fund and projects a contribution of \$774,048 in FY2027.