

The Virgin Islands Consortium

At Corrections, Low Morale, Disarray And A Swelling Budget Of \$28.3 Million

VIC News / **Published On August 13, 2014 02:43 PM /**

Ernice Gilbert **August 13, 2014**



Yesterday may have been one of sunshine in the Virgin Islands as is mostly the case, but for Virgin Islands Corrections Bureau Director Julius Wilson, the heat coming from members of the 30th Legislature scorched him for three hours on Tuesday, as he defended a \$28.3 million budget for fiscal year 2015.

The bureau, under consent decrees from 1986 and 1994 at the Golden Grove Correctional Facility on St. Croix and the Criminal Justice Complex on St. Thomas respectively, oversees the aforementioned facilities and Alva. A. Swan Correctional Annex on St. Thomas. There are also two central facilities: one in downtown Christiansted and the other in the St. Thomas town of Charlotte Amalie.

In total, the prison houses 550 inmates -- including those incarcerated in the territory and others who are imprisoned off-Island.

The spiraling cost to keep Corrections afloat prompted Senators to ask tough questions to Wilson. One such question was on the topic of energy-saving methods brought up by Senator Rivera O'Reilly, a member of the Senate Finance Committee, who accused Wilson of being "less than vigilant" in seeing that task through its completion, after testifying last year that he was in the process of evaluating the facility's energy needs, and would find ways to reduce consumption.

Other Senators swiftly followed O'Reilly and said that Wilson was lead-footed when it came to granting promotions with associated title and pay increases to a number of employees.

When Wilson pointed out that two of his staff members who were expected to be present at the hearing called out sick for the day on Tuesday, Senator Gittens pounced, citing irresponsibility, adding that when such important matters need to be discussed, staff should do their utmost best to be present.

Wilson said that Corrections has been bedeviled with resignations, retirements and termination, and said that his efforts to recruit new employees is continual. Senators, however, countered without delay, contending that moral was low at Corrections because Wilson has straggled when it came to pay raises, promotions and facility upgrades.

As it relates to consent decree, Wilson said "experts from all over the country have come to our facilities and offered reports to the federal court. We must address the issues in the reports and meet all the requirements in the allotted time frames provided by the agreement.

On security, he said "we utilized the resources provided for upgrading our facilities through the installation of fiber optics toward enhancing our new telecommunication system with an expected completion date by the end of this fiscal year."

Wilson added that the department was in the process of purchasing additional cameras for internal and external monitoring. The department has also hired a psychiatrist; licensed practical nurse and other medical staff in order to bring the bureau up to standard for the increasing medical needs of both inmates and detainees.