

The Virgin Islands Consortium

VIPD Short 200 Officers, Commissioner Vows Action To Put 'Dent' In Crime

VIC News / **Published On February 12, 2015 09:21 PM /**

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Governor Mapp Thursday at a press conference held at Government House on St. Croix acknowledged the rise of violent crime in the territory and made known, through Police Commissioner-designee Delroy Richards, that action was being taken to stop the bloodshed.

"As many of you know, since about mid-February, I believe we have had around eight homicides for the year, and these homicides are taking place in broad daylight, they are occurring around our schools, and these acts are becoming more and more distressing to the community, and somewhat more blatant and bold in broad daylight," Mapp said.

The governor then gave Richards the opportunity to reveal to residents the steps that were being taken by the VIPD to stem the violence.

Richards began by providing assurances that because of his extensive background in law enforcement and that he is a past police chief, he is uniquely positioned to lower crime activity in the Virgin Islands.

"Less than two months ago, I inherited the Virgin Islands Police Department, and immediately I began to assess the department's crime-fighting capabilities," he said. "I chose to reference crime-fighting capabilities, because I believe this concern is at the forefront of the minds of the residents."

Richards continued, "First and foremost, I am not new to crime-fighting, because most of my career was spent doing just that. I have been a crime-fighter since 1968, and I continue to do just that.

"I have began the process of restructuring the police department in a manner that brings consistency to the police operations. To do that, I have assigned the task to the new deputy commissioner of police operations with total oversight over both districts. This is one police department, and our mission must be reflected as a territorial response to crime."

The police department is in dire need of more officers, Richards acknowledged. However, he praised officers for the difficult work they do, despite being short staffed and under-supported.

"Despite of a severe shortage of police personnel in both districts -- approximately 200 personnel short -- police officers are continuing to work tirelessly in responding, and continue to make numerous arrests," he said.

Then, Richards revealed that he had been working on a proposal he believes would propel law enforcement crime-fighting efforts in the territory.

"I have on my desk currently, a proposal to provide a multi-agency response group on St. Thomas to assist the Virgin Islands Police Department with its enforcement efforts. This proposal is currently being reviewed," Richards said.

The department had embarked on a recruitment drive prior to Richards' arrival; however, those efforts were unsuccessful within the St. Thomas-St. John District.

Richards said he wholeheartedly believes the VIPD's recruitment efforts must be more aggressive. He spoke of a recruitment program the department is set to roll out that will encourage current officers to enroll potential officers, and those who are successful in doing so stand to receive incentives, depending upon how many candidates are recruited.

Regarding gang violence, Richards said he has charged both chiefs of police to ensure proactive patrol initiatives are stepped up within identifiable crime areas.

"And all technical data and intelligence information must be utilized to target those persons of interest, who seem to move about freely without fear of being challenged," he

added.

It is impossible not to at least ponder how illegal firearms are entering the territory. Richards acknowledged it would be difficult to completely stop the influx of these firearms, stating that the problem is like "cutting a branch off a tree," and that "the accessibility to firearms is alarmingly high, [so] we must go after the root," he said.

"To do this, we must, and we will, enlist the assistance of our federal partners in law enforcement to provide logistical and other support to assist in this endeavor. I have [started to make] such contacts," Richards said. He noted that he has attended meetings in Puerto Rico, where other agency officials gathered, and was able to network and enlist assistance.

The commissioner-designee said the VIPD alone "will never be able to combat the alarming crime rate in this territory, especially when guns are so readily accessible. We need the assistance now," he explained.

Richards then pointed out the need for the territory's shores and airports to be better secured in an effort to ensure that illegal firearms are not being smuggled in. He revealed that two weeks ago, he met with several of his federal law enforcement partners, and as a result of their discussions, the marine response capabilities on St. Croix will be strengthened.

"I have also embarked on a mission to revitalize the now-defunct St. Thomas Marine Division," he said.

Richards said the resources needed to restart the St. Thomas program have been identified and the department has begun the vetting process.

"Our shores must once more be patrolled by officers, which eventually, will be cross-designated by our federal partners," he said.

Richards also addressed the recent shooting deaths in the territory -- most of which so far have occurred on St. Thomas -- relegating the situation to "individuals who are involved in rivalry."

"The recent increase in the number of homicides, particularly on the island of St. Thomas, is primarily attributed to a small group of young individuals who are involved in rivalry factions in retaliation for a previous incident," Richards said. "In short, most shootings are retaliatory in nature. The victims are targeted and the acts are carried out when the opportunity presents itself. Victims who survive these acts of violence will invoke the code of silence, [and] will not come forward despite those crimes being committed in the presence of many of them."

He continued, "Fear is a key factor in witnesses' refusal to provide information. Most, if not all, victims are suspected perpetrators that were institutionalized at some point or the other.

"This makes the police job even more difficult, because now we have to depend solely on forensic evidence, which takes some time to be analyzed because we definitely have to send them off island. So, it takes a while before we get a return of the results of whoever

it is.

"Despite being arrested and charged, many of these perpetrators who commit violent acts walk away from the courts, after witnesses and earlier statements are rescinded, and identification provided to the police are disputed," Richards explained.

In closing, Richards sought to provide comfort to residents by stating the VIPD get a handle on crime in the territory.

"This police department will continue to step up its efforts, territorial-wise," he said. "I made it clear from the beginning [that] I have been through this before, and I know that we can put a dent in the violent crimes that we are having in this territory."