

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Gunmen Ambush Police Near Federal Building On St. Thomas

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A police officer patrolling in his vehicle near the federal building in Charlotte Amalie overnight was ambushed by gunmen who appeared to have been lying in wait for him, according to *VI Consortium* sources who requested anonymity because they were not authorized to speak on the incident.

The police officer involved in the shooting was Kendelth Wharton, sources tell *VI Consortium*. Walton did not engage his weapon, and his patrol car is said to have been struck by multiple bullets.

Although there were no casualties reported, *VI Consortium* could not confirm if the officer was wounded.

The incident has left VIPD Commissioner-designee Delroy Richards "concerned" for the safety of his police officers, and sources say the territory's top cop is considering implementing permanent two-men patrol moving forward. Currently, officers are not required to have a partner throughout the day, except in the event of an incident, a police source told *VI Consortium*. However, the source said department policy requires officers to work with a partner any time after 6 p.m.

VI Consortium could not confirm the specific time of night the incident occurred with Wharton.

This latest shooting comes as gun violence continues to rock the territory, even after Governor Mapp took a strong stance against violent crime at a recent press conference. There, the governor said he would direct Richards to seek help from federal partners and work toward all gun crimes committed in the territory being prosecuted on a federal level.

The governor [also made mention](#) of "limited use of military police," stating that, if Richards requested help from the National Guard he would sign off on it.

"[Along] with what Commissioner Richards said, there are some other things you should know," Mapp said at the Feb. 12 press conference. "I've been speaking with the commissioner today, [and] I've also advised him, based on his call, we are prepared to do a limited deployment of police from the Virgin Islands National Guard to augment VIPD in some of these initiatives targeting violence, targeting the guns in the communities where these shootings occur."

He continued, "We are going to push back and we are going to push back in a very significant way. And so, as the commissioner continues to build his partnerships with the federal government, he will let me know when he's ready and needing those resources, and upon his request, I will sign the order, giving him access to a limited deployment of military police from the Virgin Islands National Guard."

"Obviously, we know we have to pay that bill, but we'll have to pay it from our resources from which we pay overtime police officers," Mapp said.

On Feb. 16, [police found an 18-year-old St. Croix man at the back of an apartment in Concordia](#), Frederiksted dead from multiple gunshot wounds, bringing the territory's homicide count to 10, with only two months into the year.

At that same press conference, Mapp said the Virgin Islands Police Department had been [having difficulty recruiting local officers](#), making known that potential recruits were having problems passing a 7th-grade-level entrance exam.

"As Commissioner Richards indicated, we've actually begun that process and believe we have some issues with testing," Mapp said. "In fact, most of us in Government House want to sit the test because we don't understand how this test that's at a seventh-grade written level — the quad section uses no more than two digits in the arithmetic section — and we had twenty-eight people sit this test a few weeks ago, and three people passed."

"Part of the assessment is to determine why are we having these kinds of numbers, what's the issue, and are we targeting the right pool of folks for law enforcement in the community," the governor said.

Mapp said the police department may not be going after the "right type" of candidates who can "write reports, [be] able to testify clearly and concisely in court, and do the admin work of a police officer, and be able to relate with the public in communicating and speaking clearly, and decisively becomes a challenge."

He added, "Maybe we need to be really talking about looking for candidates with college credits and moving to a broad basis, rather than saying a GED or high school diploma is what we want. And then we're trying to dumb the test down," the governor said. "I only use that term of reducing the level and competency of the test, just to get someone to pass it, to say that we have a police officer."

Yet, with all the challenges facing the police department's recruiting efforts, the governor held that "getting boots" on the ground is critical in his administration's efforts to secure the community.

"Those targets that we talked about in terms of numbers are real, we have to get those boots on the ground. If we are unable to fashion a strategy to get them on the ground from the community, we're going to have to import them. But we cannot have an absence of police in the territory, and expect our community and our residents to be safe," he said.