

The Virgin Islands Consortium

V.I. Peace Officers Make Less Than \$30K, Fighting For Pay Increase Since 2009

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...all of our lives have increased with WAPA, groceries, doctor visits, everything have increased, except our pay. And the new administration comes in and they are increasing the pay of all the highest officials. -- Jonathan Marius, DLCA peace officer

Members of the territory's peace officer enforcement unit take home less than \$30,000 annually and they have not seen a pay increase in nearly a decade. However, with the recent announcements of pay raises -- some up to 30 percent -- awarded to Mapp administration officials, union leaders representing the peace officers question why they are being told the V.I. government does not have the funds to pay the workers the 2

percent increase that had been negotiated as far back as 2009.

Jerry Jackson, United Steel Workers staff representative who oversees the territory's 28 peace officers in both island districts, spoke with *VI Consortium* Tuesday following a meeting with officials from the Dept. of Personnel's Office of Collective Bargaining (OCB) -- the government entity that negotiates labor contracts in the territory.

"The response right now is that the government doesn't have the money," Jackson began. "That there is a \$113 million shortfall, and they don't have the money to actually give them anything."

But Jackson said he has been facing road blocks like this for a long time.

"The union negotiated a contract in 2009 that expired in 2012. That contract was signed by Governor de Jongh and he reneged on that contract basically by not paying the people their money," he explained.

In fact, Jackson said the former governor vetoed the bill after signing it.

"Like I said before, that was something that was done in the 2009-2012 contract, where they got a 2 percent increase and the governor reneged on that increase, even though the monies was appropriated by the Legislature, he then turned around and vetoed it," he said.

Following the contract's expiration in 2012, Jackson said a new contract was re-negotiated and it is set to expire in September of this year. Yet, at Tuesday's short meeting, another date had been set for a wage re-opener, which results when a contract has been negotiated, but wages remain the same and a separate date is set to discuss the wage increase.

"They extended the wage re-opener to May 6 of this year," Jackson said. "We notified them today that our enforcement officers cannot wait any longer for their wages."

A call placed to Valdemar A. Hill, chief negotiator at OCB, had not been returned at press time.

Dual Roles

Peace officers -- whose primary role is to perform enforcement for the Department of License and Consumer Affairs, the Department of Health, and the Department of Planning and Natural Resources -- also provide enforcement for the Virgin Islands Police Department.

"We protect life and property and serve the community you live in," explained Jonathan Marius, union representative and shop steward for DLCA on St. Croix. "Our primary job is dealing with businesses, to make sure they follow the law. At the same time, we are also tasked with doing police work. We see traffic violations, anything concerning public safety, we need to address it in our close proximity or vicinity. Any assistance that VIPD needs, we have to render it."

Yet, peace officers make much less than VIPD officers.

"Our concerns right now is that these employees are being paid less than the police officers," Jackson said. He pointed out that peace officers sometimes work with special agents from the FBI, they worked when Vice President Joe Biden visited the territory, and during January's inauguration ceremonies.

"Sometimes they have to wait months before they can get their overtime pay," Jackson explained. "They are being paid less than police officers. Most of these individuals are being paid less than \$30,000 a year. They have not seen a wage increase in the last, close to 10 years. they are at the bottom of the totem pole, as far as I look at it."

He continued: "It is more of a morale issue moving forward and maybe that's why crime is so rampant in the Virgin Islands right now because the people who are supposed to protect and serve, you're not treating them the way they are supposed to be treated by giving them the wage increases."

According to information found on the [VIPD website](#), the territory's police officers are paid \$27,753 during academy training and \$30,000 at graduation. In addition, officers with a degree in police science or a related field see significant increases in their salaries, up to 30 percent.

A Peace Officer Speaks Out

"Many of us, including myself, we're making under \$30,000," Marius said. "Insurance have increased, all of our lives have increased with WAPA, groceries, doctor visits, everything have increased, except our pay. And the new administration comes in and they are increasing the pay of all the highest officials, whether they be commissioners, assistant commissioners, directors and assistant directors."

Marius, who joined the department in 2005 and returned again in 2009, said he opposes a bill introduced by Sen. Sammuel Sanes that has gotten recent support from Sens. Kenneth Gittens and Novelle Francis, both former law enforcement officers, that seeks to bring the territory's peace officer enforcement unit under the VIPD umbrella.

"I have a problem with that because you could put all the officers you want on the streets and you will still have these shootings," Marius said. "A lot of them are revenge opportunities just waiting. Officers aren't going to just stop them like that."

Then, turning back to the pay issue, he added, "Now, they don't have the monies to pay us our increases, so how is it they're going to find money to pay us overtime? That's a problem. And if we are working under the VIPD umbrella, they need to treat us much better than that."

When asked what recourse he had in solving the contract issue, Jackson said going through the courts is an option.

"My only recourse right now is to see what we could get through the courts, if we have to go that direction," he said, adding, "because I'll be very honest with you, I'm not going to tell these guys to go out there and strike. I have no intention of shutting down the government because if these guys decide to strike or shut down the government, that means you have to bring in the national guard because these are peace officers."

In the mean time, he has requested a meeting in April with the Senate Committee on Education and Workforce Development, chaired by Sen. Jean Forde,"to testify before the Committee and let them know exactly what the Steel Workers Union are suffering from." Furthermore, Jackson said he has been arranging meetings with all the commissioners-designee and agency heads to present his case before them.

He also plans to meet with Gov. Mapp.

"What we have decided to do is give the governor the opportunity to look at everything that is out there. Give him his hundred days so he could get his administration in place," Jackson said.

Then summing up his frustrations, Marius, who says he has a college degree, said, "Many of us have to have second jobs because we would never make it on our salaries, not just St. Croix, but St. Thomas. So, we need the public to hear us."