

The Virgin Islands Consortium

VING: 57 Soldiers To Lose Jobs In 2016; Exchange Program Curtailed After Soldiers Caught Reselling Alcohol To Businesses

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ST. THOMAS – The Senate Committee on Homeland Security, Public Safety and Justice – chaired by Sen. Novelle Francis, Jr. met in a morning session to hear testimony from the Virgin Islands National Guard at the Earle B. Ottley Legislative Hall Friday.

Maj. Gen. Renaldo Rivera, the Adjutant General of the Virgin Islands National Guard (VING), said United States military cutbacks set to take place in 2016 “will have a negative impact on VING’s overall force structure.”

Responding to a question from Sen. Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly, Rivera said 57 part-time soldiers are projected to lose their jobs next year. Rivera said this will happen due to the Congress' Budget Control Act of 2010, unless the U.S. House of Representatives and U.S. Senate votes to suspend or eliminate the second round of "sequestered events."

Sen. Justin Harrigan, Sr. asked why access to the VING's base exchange or "PX" on St. Thomas had been denied to the territory's first responders.

Col. Daryl Jaschen, the VING vice chief of staff, said policy changes went into effect after people using the PX bought alcohol and wine at the reduced rates the military base exchange offers and then turned around and re-sold it on the open market to local businesses.

Sen. Kenneth Gittens, the committee co-chairman, asked Jaschen why the PX on St. Croix closed in February 2013.

Jaschen said the decision to close the base exchange was strictly a business decision that was made after the PX in Estate Bethlehem lost money five years in a row.

"We're supposed to be self-sustaining," he said.

Responding to a question from Harrigan, Col. Edward Richards, the VING operational reservist, said there are currently "30-31" soldiers deployed to American military campaigns with about "6-8" in the Air National Guard and the rest as military police.

Sen. Sammuel Sanes wanted to know why the VING didn't "roll out" the generators when Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority customers lost electricity for at least 14 hours on Saturday and the Juan F. Luis Hospital and Medical Center needed help.

Maj. Gen. Rivera said VING did help the hospital. Richards said the Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency called and asked the National Guard to help and VING sent personnel to the hospital who repaired one of the generators and then brought two working generators to the site as backups.

"We are here to support our community," Rivera said.

Sen. Rivera-O'Reilly said when she tried in 2014 to help institute the Youth Challenge with the VING – a 22-week program that puts at risk 16-18 boys who have dropped out of high school back on track, she was told by the Gov. John de Jongh administration that funding was available for the program and that they didn't need her help.

"The problem why things don't seem to get any traction in our territory is because politics permeates everything," she said.

Jaschen said the Youth Challenge program is voluntary and needs 75 high school dropouts to be enrolled, meaning that at least 90 would have to sign up at the beginning to allow for teenagers who wash out of the program. He said it costs \$17,000 per cadet and that 25 percent of the cost must be born by the local government.

Maj. Gen. Rivera said there are six full-time, federally-funded positions currently vacant at the VING on St. Croix, including a financial analyst, administrative officer, maintenance

engineer and three security guards. Civilians are eligible for the positions, he said.

Sen. Rivera-O'Reilly asked what equipment the VING has on St. Croix and Maj. Gen. Rivera said a bulldozer and traxcavators. The St. Croix senator asked if the equipment could be used to help fix the roads as part of military training exercises.

Richards, responding for Maj. Gen. Rivera, said the Department of Public Works would have to make the request and that the exercise must benefit the soldiers militarily in sharpening their skills. However, the VING's Innovative Readiness Training Program might be the best way to do it.