

The Virgin Islands Consortium

From VIPD To VI Fire Service, Overtime Pay Taking Toll On First Responder Agencies

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ST. CROIX -- Just like the Virgin Islands Police Department before it, the Virgin Islands Fire Service (VIFS) Director nominee Eugene Farrell testified before the Committee on Finance at the Frits E. Lawaetz Conference Room on Thursday, revealing that overtime pay was the biggest problem facing the department he heads, as important services are left without budget allocations because the funding is used to pay staff for the extra hours of work.

"Manpower shortage continues to be a problem and it accounts for our over expenditure of the service's budget," Farrell said. "As a result, the overtime expended for FY 2014 was \$1.5 million and our appropriation for overtime was \$250,000."

Farrell continued, making known that currently VIFS has spent \$1,037,953 for FY 2015 in overtime, even as the department was given zero dollars for overtime in the same year.

There are 234 active VIFS employees, and the department has lost 67 firefighters over the last 8 years.

Additionally, the St. Thomas-St. John district has 17 fire personnel and 3 on St. Croix who dedicate their service to the Virgin Islands National Guard. The director nominee said the department can take risky measures like running crews short of personnel to help reduce overtime costs, "but is it a gamble and high risk that the community is willing to take? That's the question we're here to answer today," he said.

On Wednesday, VIPD Police Commissioner Delroy Richards said at a Committee on Finance hearing in the same building that the department he heads had annual overtime costs of over \$11 million because of staff shortages. Richards also made known that the VIPD was short over 200 police officers, a problem exacerbated by the difficulty in finding candidates who can pass the police entrance exams.

Also on Wednesday, freshman St. Thomas Democrat Marvin Blyden said [there were too many women in the VIPD, adding that they tend to be "timid"](#) in certain situations. The senator [tried to clarify](#) his remarks, but his efforts have [seemingly failed](#) to quell the firestorm that ensued.

Compounding the financial problems, Farrell said the VIFS budget allotment has dwindled over the years, moving from \$17.5 million in 2012, a 16 percent reduction from the 2010 levels which stood at \$21 million. The Fiscal year 2015 budget is \$16,357,86.

"In FY 2016, the fire service like all other agencies will attempt to operate efficiently and provide much-needed services," Farrell said. The director made known that 97 percent of department's budget is set aside for personnel costs, while the remaining 3 percent is for contractual mandated costs, including rent, utilities, communication, training and professional services. Farrell said the 3 percent is "clearly not enough" to meet the aforementioned costs.

In relation to 97 percent of the department's budget being allocated for personnel, Farrell said, "please bear in mind [the] VI Fire Service is in business to provide services to the community, so the majority of our expenses are for personnel costs."

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Corrective measures in relation to reducing overtime would see VIFS hiring 67 new firefighters if the Senate would add \$3.5 million to the the department's budget. To completely eliminate overtime save for training purposes, Farrell said 105 new firefighters would be needed, equating to an additional \$5.4 million in funding.

Like the VIPD, the VIFS, it seems, will continue to operate with an inadequate budget to meet its needs because of the current budget deficit the government is facing, presently standing at around \$120 million.

At each of the budget hearings, various government departments and agencies have conveyed concern with the lack of adequate funding to effectively do their work, while at the same time making known they will strive to provide exceptional service during this time of fiscal discipline.

Also at the Committee on Finance hearing on Thursday were Veterans Affairs Director nominee Patrick Farrell and Office of Management and Budget Director nominee Nellon Bowry. They presented budgets of \$758,000 and \$4.22 million respectively.

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