

The Virgin Islands Consortium

V.I. Fire Service Improves On Overtime Costs; Needs More Firefighters

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ST. THOMAS -- At a sparsely attended Senate Committee on Finance hearing at the Earl B. Ottley Legislative Hall here, senators heard testimony from three government departments, including the V.I. Fire Service, Office of Management and Budget, and the Division of Personnel.

Their showing at the Senate is part of a myriad of 2017 budget hearings, which sees the Finance Committee, chaired by Senator Clifford Graham (Mr. Graham won't be running for reelection), combing through the funding being allocated to the various functioning arms of the government.

Fire Service Director Clifford Joseph said the department is seeking a 2017 budget of \$20.4 million, as compared to last year's \$18.2 million. Mr. Joseph said most of the funding -- 97 percent or \$19.6 million -- is for personnel costs, including payroll, while the remaining 3 percent covers travel, rent and utilities. Vehicles, operations, maintenance, professional services and other expenses are covered by the Emergency Services Special Funds, which is funded through cellphone and landline phone surcharges.

Last year, overtime pay took a toll on the Fire Service's budget, according to then-Acting Director Eugene Farrell, who testified that important services were left without budget allocations because the funding was being 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," Mr. Farrell [said last year](#). "As a result, the overtime expended for FY 2014 was \$1.5 million and our appropriation for overtime was \$250,000."

The cost decreased this year, however, falling from \$1.6 million during the 2015 fiscal year, to a current total of \$910,605. The decrease could be credited to several factors, among them [new firefighter graduates](#).

But Mr. Joseph said the department is still strained and needs an additional 23 firefighters, and noted that dozens firefighters -- well over 50 territory-wide -- are eligible for retirement.

Mr. Graham and his colleagues Tregenza Roach, Marvin Blyden and Sammuel Sanes, heard from Nellon Bowry, director of O.M.B., who detailed a budget of \$4.8 million, which is just over last year's \$4.1 million. Mr. Bowry outlined the Mapp administration's miscellaneous budget of \$104 million, including allocations of \$102.8 million, while the remaining \$1.3 million was set aside for scholarships.

The committee also heard from Personnel Director Milton Potter, who came with a budget request of \$4.15 million, an increase of over \$600,000 year-over-year -- which Mr. Potter said was a result of salary increases and initiatives being helmed at the division.

Feature Image: Clifford Joseph. (Credit: V.I. Legislature)