

The Virgin Islands Consortium

EMS Employees Protest Potential Merger With V.I. Fire Service; Call For New Ambulances 'Immediately'

VIC News / **Published On July 08, 2016 10:45 AM /**

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ST. CROIX -- Off-duty employees of the Emergency Medical Services, which falls under the Department of Health and is stationed at the territory's hospitals, protested outside the Charles Harwood Memorial Hospital on Thursday afternoon, decrying the potential merging of EMS and the Virgin Islands Fire Service, as a move employees say is being considered and discussed without involving them, and one that could potential undermine the quality of work EMS provides daily.

But the grievances go beyond the merger. Employees protesting yesterday said ambulances have been in extremely poor conditions for multiple years -- something D.O.H. Commissioner Michelle Davis spoke of during [D.O.H.'s budget hearing](#) -- and

they also called for additional staff to spread the workload.

A man who would only identify himself as Mr. Camacho, said he knew of a measure that passed the Senate and was signed into law by Governor Kenneth Mapp -- [the emergency vehicles bill](#) -- that included funding for new ambulances. The funding will be made available through a \$10 million Banco Popular loan, which was [recently approved](#) by the Public Finance Authority.

For Mr. Camacho, however, that's not fast enough. He said there's been talk of new ambulances were needed immediately.



Dr. Michelle Davis, center, and Property and

Procurement Commissioner Randolph Bennett, left of Dr. Davis, listen to the concerns of protesting EMS employees on Thursday afternoon.

"That sounds nice and beautiful. But it's over a year now we've been hearing the same song, you understand? And we need the ambulances like today," he said. He said two ambulances were in operation, "but they are on a day-to-day basis. We have oil leaks, air condition problems, we have a lot of maintenance issues because they're old."

Another employee protesting yesterday, confirming that they'd been left out of the merger talks, called for answers. "We want answers -- Fire [Service] merger, the ambulance being fully legalized for us to be on the street, having registration, insurance, stuff like that -- our safety is first, always. We would never leave the community, we're not refusing to work, but our safety is always firsts," she said.

Jerry Galloway, a paramedic at EMS spoke extensively on why he believes the merger is a bad idea; his exasperation compounded because discussions to merge the two agencies have not included the employees.

"A lot of things are happening involving EMS without involving EMS. So they're doing things to us," he said. "They're making changes, they're adopting rules, they're trying to merge, and we don't have a say in it at all. And the individuals actually providing the information [to Governor Kenneth Mapp] don't have a clue about EMS, and that's the problem we're having."

Most places where Fire Service and EMS work as one unit started offering services together from the onset, Mr. Galloway, who worked in the same field for about 15 years on the U.S. mainland, said. He pointed out that no research had been conducted to determine the efficiency of a merger. "And if we're talking about a merger, shouldn't EMS be included in this consultation?" He asked rhetorically. And EMS, he further stated, has been nationally accredited for over 40 years. "And you're putting us with a department who doesn't hold any national standards."

In a press release issued late Thursday, Senator Novelle Francis said he reached out to health and union officials after learning of the demonstration the employees. He spoke to Dr. Davis and Eugene Irish, vice president of the United Industrial Workers, to get more information on the grievances that may have led to the work action.

Mr. Francis said he knows that the issue of the merger is a sensitive topic for the employees. In May, the freshman Democrat hosted a meeting with representatives of the D.O.H., Fire Service and the Office of the Governor to find middle ground in what has become a highly charged discussion.

"Right now, I haven't even seen a draft of the legislation for the proposed merger. I have, however, facilitated ongoing dialogue to ensure that any proposal being considered meets the needs of our local community and ensures that all impacted employees remain whole," he said.

"Obviously the employees' concerns have merit. However, there is no immediate fix. I am confident that if all parties are willing to sit at the table to find solutions that this can be resolved," Mr. Francis concluded.

A press release issued by D.O.H. Thursday said Dr. Davis as well as Department of Planning and Natural Resources Commissioner Randolph Bennett met with protesters to discuss ambulance insurance. However, the press release did not address the merger issue.

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