The Virgin Islands Consortium

G.E.R.S. Says Out Of 203 Retirement Applications It Received In 2016, Only 23 Have Been Processed

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ST. CROIX -- Last month, retired V.I.P.D. employee Patricia Tranberg Stevens stood outside G.E.R.S. near the Subway Restaurant in Golden Rock, protesting what had befallen her because she had not received a single check from G.E.R.S. after retiring in December, 2015. Her home was facing foreclosure and her father was ill.

Rolston Friday Jr., who retired in August 2015 after serving 30 years as a law enforcement officer in the territory, as of September 2016 had not received a single check, either.

“I have used up all of my savings. I relocated to New York after I retired for personal reasons, however if I was home (STX) I would have also stood with you in protest. This is so unjust," he said.

The stories of Ms. Tranberg and Mr. Friday are two of hundreds of government employees who, after retiring applied for their annuity benefits from G.E.R.S. and haven't received a single payment from the pension system, some for well over a year, and others near 11 months.

That's according to G.E.R.S. Administration Austin Nibbs, who revealed the numbers during his report at a board meeting this morning. According to Mr. Nibbs, G.E.R.S. has processed only 23 of some 203 retirement applications that it received as of January, 1, 2016. And it was behind by 42 applications for 2015, processing some 257 out of the 299 it received for that year, according to Mr. Nibbs.

The revelation exposes the plight that hundreds of retirees in the territory face upon retirement, especially those who depend on the income to make ends meet. Mr. Nibbs said the biggest cause of the delay was the lack of the government's payment into the system for its employees, as well as missing NOPAs (Notice of Personnel Action).

Mr. Nibbs also revealed that at least six tier 3 employees -- about 32 in total -- had agreed to diminished annuities from the original amount of 3 percent to 2.5 percent, a decision G.E.R.S. made based on an assumption that the government would not pay its required portion, even before actually billing the government.

Tier 3 had received a letter from the pension system asking that they sign a document agreeing to the diminished annuities, but the the employees bucked at the offer, with retiree Fire Service retiree Davidson Charlemagne telling The Consortium he would not sign a document that diminishes his annuity payments.

“That’s not what was agreed upon,” he said. “And I’m not going to agree to it. G.E.R.S. had no problem taking my money monthly, but when it’s time to pay an agreed upon amount, they’re saying something different.”

The days of heavy G.E.R.S. coverage last month came around the time that senators who make up the 31st Legislature were ratifying the G.V.I.'s 2017 operating budget. Senator Tregenza Roach added language in one of two measures allocating $100 million to the pension system, for what senators say is to satisfy at least a portion of the government’s obligation to government employees relative to G.E.R.S. The system's unfunded liability, as of last month, stood at $1.7 billion.

Correction Oct. 20, 2016

A previous version of this story stated that six firefighters had accepted G.E.R.S.'s 2.5 percent annuity decrease offer. Six tier 3 employees did accept the deduction, but it's not certain if they were all firefighters, or other government employees. The story has been updated to reflect the correct information.