

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Gov't Agencies Unite To Meet Emergency Response Demands On St. Croix

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ST. CROIX -- The community was in an uproar when it learned that there were no operational ambulances available for use here late Wednesday and into Thursday, many expressing disbelief, dismay, and sadness that a U.S. island, where over 40,000 people live, could have been left in such a vulnerable position.

They took to this publication's [Facebook platform](#), and also its [website](#), to rail against the government, assailing leaders for allowing the situation to deteriorate so badly. Some even appeared resigned, stating that the people should not be surprised by the situation as, they said, government incompetency in the territory is nothing new.

But while the venting was in order, the agency heads responsible for rectifying the matter, along with Senator Novelle Francis, held an impromptu meeting outside the Juan F. Luis Hospital's emergency room Saturday morning, discussing the situation at length, as well as solutions to ensure that it never happens again. The gathering came about after Mr. Francis, a former EMS employee, visited the hospital to meet with EMS personnel to ensure that their needs were being met.

Among them were Property and Procurement Commissioner Randolph Bennett, Fire Service Director Clifford Joseph, St. Croix District Training Officer for the Emergency Medical Service Jacqueline Greenidge-Payne, at least two emergency medical technicians and three VI National Guard personnel. Department of Health Commissioner Michelle Davis and D.O.H. Deputy Commissioner Juan Figueroa-Serville came after this reporter left.

An area where all parties agreed needed immediate attention was the lack of in-house maintenance. EMS personnel said when an ambulance needs repair, it must be taken to Metro Motors to be fixed because EMS does not have its own maintenance employee. And without a maintenance worker on site, problems looked at as small grow into bigger issues later, lessening the lifespan of the vehicle. The EMS department is also in need of more employees, according to Mrs. Greenidge-Payne, as the current total of 22 have managed the growing demand of emergency services on this island.

According to Mr. Bennett, the Fire Service was to meet with EMS personnel on Monday, as well as D.O.H. officials, to discuss how V.I.F.S. could help. He said at least two to three V.I.F.S. personnel would aid the EMTs respond to calls once execution details were ironed out.

Multiple times during the discussions, Mr. Bennett was praised for his proactive approach. The commissioner took the initiative to purchase two used ambulances to meet the immediate need of ambulatory services in both districts, but the St. Croix ambulance, EMS personnel said, was unusable because its elevation off ground was higher than the current fleet, a situation that made it difficult to lift stretchers into the emergency vehicle. The ambulance, which this reporter saw firsthand yesterday, did appear inches taller than the one currently in use.

Department of Property and Procurement, as its name makes clear, is responsible making government purchases, as well as managing its assets. Mr. Bennett said P&P ordered 7 new ambulances three weeks ago, four to be used in this district and three for the St. Thomas-St. John district, at a cost of just over \$200,000 each. But because the new ambulances are being custom-built for use in the territory, they will take six months before being shipped to the islands. Mr. Bennett told this publication that knowing firsthand the immediate need for ambulatory services, he moved proactively to buy the two refurbished ambulances.

Parked in the emergency area of J.F.L.'s emergency department alongside another ambulance was the V.I. National Guard's tactical ambulance. The vehicle, according to personnel at gathering yesterday, was made for battle-related wounds, including gunshot and shrapnel victims, but not situations such as heart attacks and related civilian emergencies. The vehicle looks intimidating and could only be managed by army personnel, two of whom had been designated to work with EMS personnel in accordance

with an order signed by Acting Governor Osbert Potter.

The tactical ambulance was opened for this reporter by an unnamed individual to have a look on the inside. Its capabilities were later demonstrated by the two army personnel on site. They dismounted a bed and turned it into a sitting area that medics could use to care for a patient, who would be placed on the other side of the vehicle.

But the army ambulance, Mr. Bennett said, would be used only if there were multiple emergencies where a second emergency vehicle was needed. The idea, he said, was to assure that whatever occurs, EMS is able to respond so as to not leave any resident needing care unattended.

Mr. Francis, a former EMS worker himself, said he understood the cries of the EMTs, and committed to finding lasting solutions. He was also praised by Mrs. Greenidge-Payne as a senator who always reaches out to EMS employees looking for ways to help.

While the discussions were ongoing, a call came in and two EMTs boarded the D.O.H. ambulance and headed out. Mrs. Greenidge-Payne then pivoted, mentioning the dedication of the EMS employees, who she said are on call 24/7, 365, and the many injuries that they have suffered while attempting to save lives. She offered that they should be honored for their dedicated service, and Mr. Francis swiftly responded: "Send something up to me. Let's work on it."

Feature Image: The V.I. National Guard's tactical ambulance, parked next to a civilian ambulance at the Juan F. Luis Hospital. (Credit: Ernice Gilbert, VIC)