

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Limetree Bay Contractors Bringing Employees From Puerto Rico Instead Of Hiring Locals, Senator Rivera-O'Reilly Says

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Ernice Gilbert **March 22, 2017**



ST. THOMAS -- Limetree Bay Terminals has represented to many senators and Governor Kenneth Mapp, a bright spot in their political careers as they continually point to the storage facility -- which has employed over 600 people since opening -- as a deal that has helped boost the territory's struggling economy, and as a clear demonstration of their efforts to bring prosperity to the Virgin Islands.

But during a hearing held by the Committee of Workforce Development, Consumer Affairs and Culture at the Earl B. Ottley Legislative Hall on Tuesday, Senator Nereida

Rivera-O'Reilly said that Limetree Bay contractors, instead of hiring locals, were shipping in employees from neighboring Puerto Rico.

"Several weeks ago I met with individuals of Limetree Bay, and one of the reasons I asked for the meeting was because I wanted them to learn about the programs under the Department of Labor, in particularly the Workforce, Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014, because all of us get calls all of the time from people who say they're not being considered for jobs at the storage terminal, but we're all keenly aware that people are being brought from Puerto Rico to fill these jobs," said Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly. She said the contractors said they were not aware of the programs included in the Act -- including several training, "and the ability that exists were they to become partners and providers, to train the disengaged, out-of-school youth and to ultimately get them a job," the senator added.

Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly said she left the meeting with an understanding that Limetree Bay would gather all of its contractors into a meeting, along with a D.O.L. representative who would explain the programs that exist. She added that between four to five contractors were asked to fund the training of five young men with the intent of ultimately hiring them, which she said would result in 20 to 25 additional jobs for locals.

The territory has yet to fully recover from the closure of HOVENSA in 2012, which left about 2,000 people unemployed, caused a ripple effect through the economy and forced thousands to migrate to the U.S. mainland in search for opportunities. Today, the territory's unemployment rate stands at 10.5 percent, D.O.L. Commissioner Catherine Hendry revealed. The national average is currently 4.9 percent.

Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly then levied a pointed criticism to Ms. Hendry, bluntly telling the commissioner that her department, relative to the needs of the unemployed, has been out of touch.

"As you read your testimony, it is clear -- and please forgive me if I offend you -- it is clear that your department does not really get the level of hopelessness that exists within those individuals that are unemployed," she said.

The senator added that while testimonies given by D.O.L. officials may sound good on paper -- and to people with four-year degrees -- "those people who have given up... they don't understand any of this," Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly contended, holding up what appeared to be testimonial documents. "All they know is that they are unemployed and they want a job; that they go to these businesses and they asked for an application, and they are told there are no job openings -- yet they see people being hired.

"All they know is that they show up at the Department of Labor, they ask for help and paper is pushed, and they are told to come back tomorrow, or they are given a number of documents to complete, and they give up."

"I don't know how we are going to address that," Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly continued, stating that the unemployed referred to in her statement are people she meet and talk to, and people who call senators' offices.

Pointing her aim back to Limetree Bay and D.O.L.'s failure to inform contractors of programs available to aid in the employment of locals, Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly said, "How is

is that the place that is supposed to be creating the most jobs within the next 24 months isn't aware of all of the great programs that exist? Why is it that [Pinnacle](#) is still not a provider? Why is it that the young men even that are in some of your programs have lacked the very basic skills to perform in those programs, and to be placed ultimately in a job?"

The senator said she would followup with the meeting with the hope of getting positive results now that the contractors' actions have been brought to the fore.

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