

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Dept. Of Labor Says Being Understaffed Means It's Unable To Take Action Against Employers Who Neglect Unemployment Insurance Payments

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Ernice Gilbert **January 30, 2018**



ST. THOMAS -- Department of Labor officials told lawmakers on Monday that because the department is understaffed, it has not pursued legal action against employers who fail to make unemployment insurance payments, which delays benefits for the newly unemployed of the delinquent employers.

The revelation came during a Committee on Workforce Development, Consumer Affairs and Culture hearing at the Earl B. Ottley Legislature, which also heard testimony from the Dept. of Licensing and Consumer Affairs, as well as the Dept. of Tourism's Beverly

Nicholson-Doty, and the V.I. Carnival Committee.

According to Elton George, director of the Unemployment Insurance Division, when employers fail to make unemployment insurance payments, the Dept. of Labor moves to garnish financial records of the claimant to determine the unemployment check amount, but because the department is understaffed, there has been no legal action against the delinquent employers. The delay is also exacerbated by an inundation of unemployment claims, Mr. George said.

That answer did not satisfy lawmakers. "Post-hurricanes, there are a lot of people who are unemployed. Therefore, the Department of Labor should not be understaffed because the vacancies are funded and the positions should be filled," said Sen. Jean Forde.

Former employees of both the Juan F. Luis Hospital and the Schneider Regional Center, have told The Consortium that they had yet to receive unemployment benefits since being relieved of their duties. The issue has worsened the already difficult living conditions of many Virgin Islanders post-Hurricanes Irma and Maria.

"There have been complaints in which people have not received an unemployment check since October 2017," said Sen. Nereida Rivera O'Reilly. Aside from the companies that may not have made adequate unemployment insurance payments, Dept. of Labor Commissioner Catherine Hendry said that the department may still be processing these claims, or the claimant may have provided insufficient documents.

Dept. of Licensing and Consumer Affairs

Devin Carrington, Dept. of Licensing and Consumer Affairs commissioner (D.L.C.A.), said the department issued notices of violation to a variety of local businesses totaling \$36,600 for 183 days of non-compliance to applicable licensees. The citations followed reports of price gouging following the hurricanes, which Mr. Carrington said prompted the department to act. He said D.L.C.A. has been preparing additional notice of violation citations to businesses that submitted a price list and then increased prices for goods and services thereafter.

Asked if D.L.C.A. had a count of the number of businesses that closed following the storms, Horace Graham, director of licensing at D.L.C.A., said it was difficult to keep count of business closings because many business owners do not report to the department when they're shutting down.

Dept. of Tourism, V.I. Carnival Committee

Dept. of Tourism (D.O.T.) Commissioner Beverly Nicholson-Doty updated lawmakers on the number of hotel rooms available territory-wide. She revealed availability on St. Croix to be seventeen hotels, with the St. Thomas-St. John having fourteen hotels that are open.

The cruise industry returned to the territory 60 days after the hurricanes, Mrs. Nicholson-Doty said. She added that many of the restaurants and attractions have reopened since the storms, although full restoration remains sometime off.

Separately, D.O.T. [issued a release](#) revealing that three airliners planned on expanding service to St. Thomas, including a direct New York to St. Thomas flight by Delta Airlines. With the latest flight additions, the U.S. Virgin Islands is now being served by approximately 13,000 seats each week — 9,000 to St. Thomas and 4,000 to St. Croix (not including intra-island service), D.O.T. said.

Halvor Hart III, executive director of the V.I. Carnival Committee, said he was not sure how the diminished hotel capacity in St. Thomas along with limited flights to the island, would affect this year's carnival celebrations. He said costs had increased, but went on to assure lawmakers that the V.I. Carnival would move ahead as planned, with the kickoff event set for February 10 at the Market Square.